

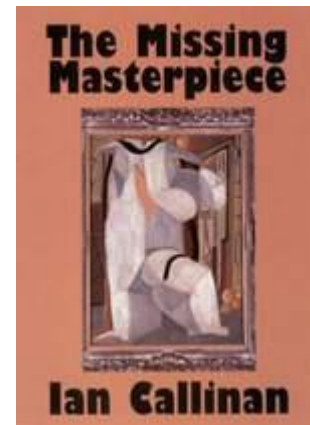


The Honourable  
Justice Ian Callinan

## A Masterpiece Discovered

a review of  
*The Missing Masterpiece*  
by Ian Callinan

(Central Queensland University Press, 2001)



Book review published in *Queensland Bar News*, January 2002

Some 15 years ago, I visited London after a holiday in France and Italy with David Andrews. Emerging, bearded, from the Piccadilly Tube Station, the first person I encountered - in a city of some 7 million souls - happened to be Elizabeth (Lu) Williams, who is now married to Paul Howard. She was on her way to Fortnum & Mason's, for lunch with her brother (Syd) and others involved in a Queensland appeal to the Privy Council. She invited me to join them.

The others were Ian Callinan QC and the instructing solicitor, Laurie Barnes. Callinan told me that I might appear as his second junior in the appeal, on three conditions: first, that I work very hard; second, that I would not be paid anything; and thirdly, as he put it, that I "shave that wretched beard off". I readily accepted all three conditions.

It was not, however, all hard work. One day, after lunch at the Café Royale, Callinan took us to Jermyn Street, to collect some shirts which he had ordered from his bespoke shirt-maker. Apparently they ran out of material to cover his ample frame, as the collars and cuffs were white, whilst the rest of the shirts were coloured. Then he took us to visit one of London's internationally renowned art auction houses.

As we passed through the impressive portal, the liveried doorman raised his top hat, and said "Good afternoon, sir" to each of Syd Williams, Laurie Barnes and myself, followed by "Good afternoon, Mr. Callinan".

Whilst we examined the works on display for a forthcoming auction, the Director approached our group, and warmly welcomed Mr. Callinan. Introductions were exchanged. Then, in a barely audible whisper, the Director addressed himself to Callinan: "We have just received some Australian works. Heidelberg School. The provenance is impeccable, but I am a little concerned about the brush-strokes. If you have a moment, I should value your opinion."

There can be no doubt regarding the provenance of *The Missing Masterpiece*. What is described as "a satirical spoof on the snobbish world of art collectors" could only have been written by a person who has spent a lifetime viewing, studying and collecting art, and dealing with the people who control the art industry - directors and curators of public galleries, owners of private galleries, auctioneers, dealers, restorers, framers, and all of the other "hangers on" who make a living out of other people's artistic talents.

*The Missing Masterpiece* is the third novel published by Callinan, and follows three plays which were successfully produced on the Brisbane stage. Of Callinan's previous works, two - the plays *Brazilian Blue* and *The Acquisition* - discussed the art world. In the former, a high-flying business entrepreneur explains that art is the easiest way to demonstrate one's commitment to culture: sponsoring opera, an orchestra, or a theatrical company, requires attendance at long and boring performances; but buying an expensive piece of art attracts enormous publicity, without any commitment of time or effort. Following a preview performance of *Brazilian Blue*, at which the playwright took a curtain call and received a standing ovation, I suggested to him that this character borrowed some features from a client whom I was then representing. Callinan grudgingly accepted that the character bore some superficial similarities to my client, Christopher Skase. *The Acquisition* was set, like Callinan's latest work, in a public art gallery, but focussed on very different issues.

To avoid any confusion regarding his new book (and possible defamation actions), Callinan emphasises that, "Apart from the fact that some Australian artists did travel in Spain in the 1880s, everything in this book is entirely fictional and a work of the imagination"; that "none of the characters in *The Missing Masterpiece* lives, or has ever lived"; and that "none of the events described has, to the author's knowledge, occurred anywhere or in real life." Few authors have the expertise of a High Court Judge in drafting their own disclaimers.

Still, anyone who has any contact with the arts in Australia will be conscious of people like the people in Callinan's book. This is not to suggest that Callinan's characters are mere parodies of prominent personages from the art world: one will look in vain, for example, to find an equivalent of Philip Bacon (Queensland's leading art dealer) or Doug Hall (director of the State Gallery). Rather, as Callinan's disclaimer suggests, his imagination has invented rich and realistic characters, who collectively reflect the wide variety of personalities one finds in the art community.

The main protagonist, Davenport Jones, is an easy character to like. In many ways, he resembles the "hapless innocent" of so many Alfred Hitchcock thrillers, ill-equipped to face all of the obstacles which stand in the way of solving the plot's central puzzle. That puzzle, as the book's title suggests, is the hunt for a missing artwork of great value and even greater historical significance.

The mystery begins in "the Capital" - an unidentified Australian State Capital, where Davenport Jones is a curator at the State Gallery. Between altercations with his superiors and colleagues - including a particularly odious Director, Silas Morning, and an even more contemptible political appointee as Chair of Trustees, May Beaster - the hero prosecutes his search for the missing masterpiece to the Gold Coast, and even to the Central Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

Despite some inevitable implausibilities, Callinan manages to maintain the plot's internal consistency, and thereby achieves a "suspension of disbelief". The story is fast-moving, and the ultimate plot resolution - after much twisting and turning - is as satisfying as any murder mystery.

Callinan's prose is lucid and thoroughly readable. Anyone who has had the privilege of hearing Callinan address a jury will recognise his clear and cogent narrative style; and anyone who has not enjoyed that privilege will understand, from reading Callinan in print, why his jury advocacy has been compared (by a highly qualified commentator) with that of the great Lord Carson.

Nor does *The Missing Masterpiece* avoid controversy. No doubt Callinan had in mind events which frequently occur in public art galleries, when he wrote the following exchange, between Davenport Jones and the niece of a potential benefactor to a public gallery:

"I know about public galleries. They prey on old people, tell them that their name will always be on a plaque beside the picture if they donate it. What you don't tell them is you'll probably never hang the thing anyway and when the fashion changes, and some new director wants to indulge himself in the latest 'ism', you'll, what do you call it when you flog something, de, de - ?"

"Deaccession."

"What a euphemism for flogging something."

Unfortunately, the adage "don't judge a book by its cover" could well have been coined in reference to *The Missing Masterpiece*. The cover's predominant colour is that which crayon manufacturers describe as "skin tone", although any human being possessing skin of that hue would be well-advised to seek urgent medical attention. The cover includes a reproduction of an attractive work from Callinan's private collection, although its connection with the plot is elusive, and the photographic reproduction has been cropped in a most extraordinary way so as to include varying widths of the frame on each of the four sides. The typeface employed on the cover attempts to be jaunty, but is so heavy that it further cheapens the book's appearance.

Despite any inference which might be drawn from the disappointing cover, Callinan has produced a lively, intelligent, and very satisfying read. In any country where the unwritten criteria for literary awards did not automatically exclude educated, reasonably affluent and professionally successful heterosexual males of Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic ethnic origin, *The Missing Masterpiece* would surely receive the enthusiastic commendation which it deserves.