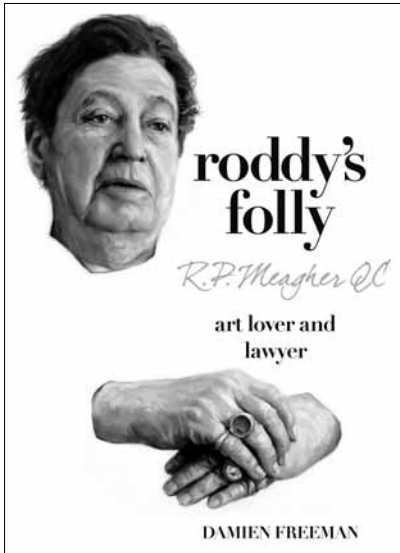


Roddy's Folly

By Damien Freeman | Connorcourt Publishing | 2011



I briefed Roddy Meagher, but only once. I had a glimpse of the man – the delightfully chaotic eccentricity of his chambers, the authority of his words, a certain languor – but I was, of course, a long way from knowing him.

Having read Damien Freeman's biography *Roddy's Folly: R P Meagher QC - Art Lover and Lawyer*, I am better informed. I have a better sense of the fragments of Meagher's life. It is hard to say how much closer I am to knowing the man.

In part, that is because it is a confusing book. Freeman describes the book as a biography. Perhaps naively, I expected a study of Meagher's life (or, having regard to the title, at least part of it). In important ways, it is not.

Freeman has a background in philosophy, art and law. It intrudes. Rather than doing his best to describe the relationship between Meagher and Meagher's wife, Penny, Freeman takes the road less (I suspect only once) travelled. He sets out a lengthy answer to a question which may have been

What is love? (loosely related to a pamphlet found in Meagher's desk). He then asks the question *Did Roddy love Penny in the way Baron von Gagern recommends?* There are, of course, clues to an answer to that question but why the author would not simply ask the question *How did Roddy love Penny?* is baffling.

The same otherworldliness is seen in Freeman's consideration of Meagher's art collection. Meagher collected art. Freeman provides this advice by way of introduction:

Collection is a subcategory of accumulation: it is intentional accumulation. It is accumulating (or keeping an extant accumulation intact) for some purpose; because the objects share some common value, or because they acquire some special value once accumulated, a value that several objects lack individually. So, for any collection, we can identify some principle that guides the accumulating.

At the best of times, ramming life into theoretical constructs has its frustrations. Freeman comes up with these observations:

To the extent that Meagher's accumulating had some purpose, it constitutes a collection.

Meagher's principle for collecting is aesthetic.

The collection's diversity is one of its most obvious features. Does this fact reveal anything about its collector? [Meagher himself replies by saying, quite understandably, *It shows I have general interests.*]

This all boils down to the belief that if you like a work of art, then you should buy it.

Those statements are each personal to Meagher but they come at

various points in the 21 pages which are devoted to what might be called a theory of art collection exemplified by that of R P Meagher.

The other difficulty which arises from erecting these theoretical edifices is that they feed speculation rather than perception. Freeman often concludes his analysis by suggesting that *it is likely that, for Meagher.. or there would no doubt be something appealing .. or Meagher would, no doubt, feel...* There is an honesty in framing his conclusions in that way, particularly since most of Meagher's opinions, expressed in the book, are contained in public statements or are secondhand or speculative, but the process is strangely circuitous. Freeman, for example, establishes that Meagher is a fan of Hilaire Belloc and G K Chesterton. He then sets out in some detail the philosophical approaches of those two men. He then speculates as to whether those views were held by Meagher.

I have said that, in important ways, this is not a study of the life of Roddy Meagher. What we end up knowing is that Damien Freeman is well read. He is probably a fine philosopher. He is certainly a student of art. He is an admirable researcher. But the book suffers, as did Patrick White according to Meagher, from a lack of rhythm. Freeman feels the need to use up his research notes, no matter how lacking in illumination of his subject. He says in his introduction that he hopes to show the reader *something about (Meagher's) life that defies articulation; something that can be shown but not said.* But then is unrestrained in taking up argument, seemingly on behalf of his subject.

And therein lies the rub. Freeman builds no trust with his audience. From the bleeding obvious to the deeply philosophical, there is rarely an opportunity to simply reflect on the man. It is clear that Meagher was a classicist who believed strongly in the type of education which he received at Riverview. Whether he would now feel that *the modern Jesuit had abandoned scholarship - and lost the balance between reason and passion, between emotion and intellect*, is as idle as it is obvious. When he accounts for Meagher's jurisprudence or political and social conservatism, it reads like the Freeman Doctrine with Meagher as the chief inspiration.

Freeman is at his best in argument. He is not a natural storyteller and he does not tell one. He sets out a series of theses. For most of the book, the argument seems more important than the subject; the cerebral more important than the emotional, the what more important than the why. I was left in a curious position. I had a perception of Meagher as a man holding to principles and beliefs, conveying them by embittered humour, a man who put a joke above a friendship, a man unable ultimately to do justice to his prodigious intellect or his position or his own emotions. And, with the benefit of the knowledge of the deep affection in which he was held by his friends, a certainty that the perception was wrong.

The obituary Dyson Heydon delivered at Meagher's funeral is referred to by Freeman and is reproduced at (2011) 85 ALJ 524. It is thoughtful and well-crafted

but it is also a moving defence of a friend. As part of that defence, Heydon comments that it is ... *at least unfortunate that many people took the mask to represent the whole man*. I am sure Freeman sees behind the mask but I am less confident that his readers do.

It is a pity. The book is well-researched and there are moments when we get to see the person – the relationship which Meagher had with his dog, Didier, the breakdown of his relationship with Bill Gummow, the curious relationship he had with Michael Kirby which is made even more intriguing by a number of cartoons, drawn by Kirby during idle moments on the bench and reproduced in the book. But for the most part we see the folly (at its height, a self-destructiveness) without really understanding why.

In the final part of the book, Freeman deals with what he calls *Personal Intuitions*. It sets out some of Meagher's beliefs and opinions, largely derived from public statements and judgments. It gathers together the opinions of Meagher in a way that does provide a basis for judgment. But then Freeman takes us down a by-now-expected, but curious, path. He debates the merits of the opinions and beliefs. Meagher becomes the springboard for Freeman's scholarship.

In the end, Freeman draws the strands together and declares eccentricity to be the key to understanding Meagher. He led a life of personal authenticity coloured by true eccentricity.

Like most of the book, it's a theory. It takes you to the mask.

But not far enough behind it for my satisfaction nor far enough to account for the very warm affection, even love, that was felt for Meagher by Dyson Heydon and many other of his friends.

When I began reading the book I wondered whether some part of the explanation for the paradoxes so evident in Meagher's life might lie in his formative years. Freeman speculates that Meagher's life growing up in Temora *would have been a fairly solitary one*. Meagher's brother, Chris, thought that Meagher may have been *the subject of a lot of taunts* at school. A family friend described him as *a very, very lonely boy*. Perhaps a mixture of humour and intellect were employed initially as coping mechanisms. However, if you are looking for further insights into issues of that type, *Roddy's Folly* will disappoint. Freeman provides evidence of Meagher's early years in a part simply entitled *Halcyon Days*.

In fairness, it might be said that the book was intended to focus on Meagher as art lover and lawyer. That would be fine except that one of the strongest and most welcome aspects of the book is an independent consideration of Meagher's wife. The book wants to get there. It never quite arrives.

Reviewed by David Alexander