

Hedley Marston

Author : Tim Sherratt

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In the 1950s, CSIRO biochemist, Hedley Marston, became embroiled in what Roger Cross describes as 'the single most important crisis' of his professional life. Research into fallout from the British atomic tests in Australia brought Marston into bitter conflict with the government appointed Safety Committee. It was a dispute that involved many of the major players in the Australian scientific community, and one that culminated in 'perhaps the most unseemly episode in twentieth-century Australian science'. This is a fascinating story of 'jealousy, hate and power' that takes us behind the facade of scientific detachment and adds to our knowledge of the politics and personalities involved in Australia's atomic adventures.

Hedley Marston, Chief of CSIRO's Division of Biochemistry and General Nutrition, was approached by British authorities in 1955 to assist in studying the effects of radiation on animals. After initial firings in 1952-3, the British atomic testing program was about to recommence in the Monte Bello Islands, and at the newly-established mainland test site known as Maralinga. Marston decided to examine the take up of radioactive fallout in grazing animals by measuring the concentration of radioactive iodine in their thyroid glands. His research indicated that fallout was being deposited over a much wider area than the physicists on the Atomic Weapons Test Safety Committee (AWTSC) had publicly admitted. Either they were fools or charlatans and Marston became increasingly determined to bring them down.

Roger Cross provides a detailed account of Marston's anger and frustration as he tried to force the AWTSC, led by Leslie Martin and Ernest Titterton, to admit their errors. Attempts at mediation by Fred White, CSIRO's Chief Executive Officer, and Mark Oliphant, Marston's close friend, failed. Rancour and recrimination escalated as Marston strove to publish his findings, only to meet obstruction and delay. Even when his work was finally made public, the controversy continued, as the AWTSC sought to have a rebuttal accepted for publication. An unpleasant battle over who would have the last word was finally brought to a halt by Oliphant. In the end, Marston's revelations seem to have had little immediate impact, but as Cross demonstrates, public opinion was already on the turn, as opposition to atmospheric nuclear testing, both in Australia and overseas, mounted.

Marston imagined himself a champion of science, a defender of truth, but Cross reveals a much more complex figure. Marston was egotistical and belligerent, ready to take the credit for his colleagues' research into coast disease, and prepared to bully anyone who stood in the way of his ambitions. His high-standing within the agricultural community, and his carefully cultivated circle of influential friends, gave him a sense of power that he clearly relished. He was no anxious whistleblower. As Cross shows, most clearly in Marston's correspondence with Oliphant, his attacks on the AWTSC were driven as much by anger and revenge, as by a desire to protect the public and defend the standards of science.

Roger Cross has given us a picture of a flawed man, a would-be hero barely able to rise above his own pettiness and insecurities. Our understanding of Marston and his bitter crusade is greatly enriched by Cross's efforts to examine the personality of the man and not just the persona of the scientist. Unfortunately, we don't gain as much insight into his opponents. Titterton clearly had an ego to match Marston's, but Les Martin seems a much more enigmatic figure. From Cross's account and other sources, it appears that Martin was uncomfortable with the public role assigned

him as first chairman of the AWTSC. What doubts and torments might Marston's provocations have engendered? Oliphant, as always, is difficult to pin down. At times he tries to soothe Marston, but on other occasions he carelessly fuels his friend's burning rage. Might he have done more to help? It is a measure of the book's success that such questions emerge. There can be no easy answers once we try to explore the human dimensions of scientific controversy.

The book provides a good read, even though the complex chronology of events makes it difficult to keep track of who said what to whom and when. It makes excellent use of oral and archival sources and is thoroughly documented. Of course, you end up wishing for a full biography of Marston, but that hardly detracts from the current volume. If only other attempts at scientific biography showed the same willingness to deal with their subject's flaws and complexities.

Was this the most unseemly episode in twentieth century Australian science? Who knows? So little has been written about the feuds and conflicts. So much lies hidden behind euphemisms such as 'a difficult man', or 'a controversial figure'. Roger Cross hopes that his story will aid our understanding of 'the tensions that lurk behind the bland face of "science rhetoric" here in Australia'. Here's hoping that others will follow his lead.

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