
GEORGE THOMAS

Well Worth the Effort

Sink or Swim: A Memoir

by Saxby Pridmore

Austin Macauley, 2021, 142 pages, about \$20

Saxby Pridmore has been one of Tasmania's leading psychiatrists since 1981, when he and a colleague became the first psychiatrists whose specialist training had been fully conducted in Tasmania. He

was Director of Psychiatry at Royal Hobart Hospital for ten years from 1993, and is now Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Tasmania. He is also a poet, whose work has appeared in *Quadrant* and other publications over the past thirty years and was collected in his fine book *White-Out* in 2016.

As with his poetry, his prose style is plain and punchy. He has written or co-written hundreds of research papers and several other books. Not a bad effort for someone who suffers from such severe dyslexia that he has never been able to read for pleasure.

His father was a strong-willed, intelligent man, with great charm, but he lacked constancy. In the post-war years, when it was common for men to work at one place all their lives, Walter Pridmore changed his work and workplace continually until he retired with a disability pension at sixty. Despite a complete lack of teaching qualifications or experience, at one stage he was employed to run the physical education at Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. Later, returning to Tasmania, he became the head of a school in Gladstone, and then the director of a state home for wayward girls in Latrobe. While he appears to have been able at these jobs, he never stayed anywhere for long, and for most of the time the family lived in genteel semi-poverty.

So life for young Saxby was frequently interrupted by sudden moves and constrained by lack of money. It was also bedevilled by his hateful elder brother, who hit him at every opportunity. And having an odd name did not help. Typically, it had not occurred to his father that when he named his son in honour of one of his friends, the poor boy would have to live not just with a highly unusual name—a difficult thing for a child—but also with being called names like “Saxby” and “Sucksby” throughout his boyhood.

His mother was loving but somewhat eccentric and sometimes distant. On the cover of the book is a fine photograph of the boy and his mother, taken by a newspaper photographer in Devonport on the family’s return to Tasmania from Adelaide in 1958. The twelve-year-old Saxby is holding one of the family’s chow-chows and looking eagerly at the camera. His mother’s attention is solely on the two dogs.

His eagerness for life kept the boy afloat in circumstances that were often difficult. He was mediocre at the popular ball sports but excelled at boxing, which his father, a former professional boxer, taught his two sons. Here Saxby was able to gain a measure of superiority over his brother, who “was better physically balanced and could punch harder. I was better mentally balanced. He would lose his temper, I could keep mine.” Later he trained alongside Lionel Rose and won the Australian

universities middleweight championship (and later still his boxing skills summarily dealt with a drunk senior colleague who had assaulted Saxby’s wife).

He relished the opportunities offered by Cubs, the junior version of the Boy Scouts: “Cubs had 13 badges for all sorts of things: gardening, swimming, bushcraft, none of them called for much reading ... Most Cubs got about three or four. I got them all.” He calls Cubs “one of the great blessings of my life”. But he eagerly embraced many other aspects of life to enlarge his worldview, such as Saturday afternoon at the pictures: “*The King and I* was a mesmerising experience; Yul Brynner was younger than our fathers but completely bald ...” When a neighbouring family threw out an old brass statue their father had brought back from the war, believing it was cursed, Saxby retrieved it from their compost heap and polished it until it shone. He took it to the South Australian Museum to ask them about it, and was told he had removed the patina from a 600-year-old Buddha, thus reducing its value.

He attended Hobart High School and was elected Head Prefect in 1963. But the school, which had just been converted by the state government from a full secondary school with established traditions to a senior college of Years 11 and 12 only, “had become a supermarket” and the position lacked the savour it would have had for his predecessors. Distracted from his studies by other activities, he failed to achieve the marks he needed if he was to be accepted by the new medical school at the University of Tasmania.

Determined to become a doctor, he embarked on the long route via physiotherapy, which he had to study for three years in Melbourne. His fees were paid by a Tasmanian government bond that required him to work for another three years as a physiotherapist in Tasmania after qualifying. While working in the physiotherapy department at Royal Hobart Hospital he studied Year 12 science subjects at night, and achieved such high marks that he was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study medicine at the University of Tasmania.

Originally intending to become an orthopaedic surgeon, he was diverted from this course in his first year when he followed up his psychology lecturer’s recommendation of Emile Durkheim’s theory of suicide. He found the topic, and psychology and psychiatry in general, so fascinating that it became his greatest interest.

The anger in this generally cheerful book is reserved for the people who closed the asylums in the last decades of the twentieth century, under the influence of “experts” who “were not clinically trained, they had never looked after psychotic/mad people, they knew nothing of the problems, in short,

BOOKS

they should have been ashamed of themselves for offering their half-baked opinions". He does not mention it, but the melodramatic 1970s film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* probably also played an important part in turning popular opinion against the psychiatric asylum. He laments the outcome:

Patients had a "community" in the asylums, that is, they had friends and support from fellow patients and staff. Outside the asylum, they had no community; the general community was ill-equipped and uninterested ... The promise of wonderful new drugs which would fix everything? Came to nothing—there have been no significant advances in drug treatment in the last 70 years.

He does, however, believe that transcranial magnetic stimulation (a recent refinement of electroconvulsive therapy), of which he was one of the Australian pioneers, has great potential in the treatment of severe depression. In 2006 Saxby Pridmore was awarded the AM "for service to psychiatry through research into a range of mental illnesses, advocacy for new and revised treatment regimes, and in health administration roles".

I finished this wistful, funny, wise book wishing it were longer. Some parts of his life he deals with only briefly; and psychiatry is such a fascinating and varied field that he could surely write at least one good memoir solely on this career.

George Thomas is deputy editor of Quadrant.
