

# Vincent Buckley as Colleague

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In 1956, Vin Buckley was in England, so I did not meet him in my first year at Melbourne University. But at the NSV's—the Newman Society's—Summer School he was an almost mythological key founding member. As an undergraduate (1956-1959) I had only one tutorial from him, and he didn't lecture to our year, or teach in the seminars I attended in my combined English and History honours year. But as a tutor (1961–1966 and 1976–1980) I went to most of the lectures so central to his wonderful teaching and influence. I want to concentrate here on my personal experience of him as a colleague. In that role, I found him to be a great teacher and exemplar, and discerningly generous to junior and other staff and students.

My first encounters with him were disconcerting.

In August 1957 I went to rosary in the Maths Hall. Among several familiar NSV faces, I noticed an isolated man—smallish, perhaps late twentyish, and was he awkward, shy or wary? I walked across and made brief small talk of the 'I haven't seen you here before' nature.

A busy fortnight later, word went round the NSV that Vincent Buckley had just returned from England and would give an evening talk. I went, and was embarrassed to recognise the speaker as the same man I'd naively tried to make at home in the Maths Hall: the same person, but to an intuitive nineteen-year-old, dismayingly different. Seated, he had an arresting torso and head, a fierce nose yet delicate mouth, a confident and contained authority. His intense focusing presence was quite at odds with my first impression. Neither prepared me for the later moments when he, as it were, reincarnated Vince Rice, my grandfather, a second-generation Irish-Australian, a somewhat embittered Gippsland dairy farmer who should have been a musician and who had wonderful gifts of mischief and laughter, and delighted in playing with children.

Perhaps that's the first point I want to make about Vin, as man and colleague. He was unexpectedly, surprisingly various. In time I learned to meet him where he was at that particular moment and not to anticipate or presume on his complexities.

In his talk about the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, I first experienced his power of speech. I already loved good talk, and in the late thirties (I was born in 1938) and during the forties and fifties it surrounded us. Some reminiscing examples:

- Churchill's seductive broadcasts filled my first few years. Our train line took us past Melbourne High and I had a fantasy of standing on its steps and giving a Churchillian address—megalomaniac in any seven-year-old, let alone a girl child;
- Two arresting Irish preachers—Dr Mannix and a fine displaced Dublin academic historian, parish priest to our small Burwood church-school where he lectured and orated and declaimed on subjects from Yalta to Rita Hayworth;

- The spellbinders in first year Arts—Kathleen Fitzpatrick and the incomparable Ian Maxwell, and the compelling actor-performers—Keith McCartney and Maggie Tomlinson.

But Vin's talk had a different quality that I couldn't quite place. His lovely voice was quietly resonant; flexible in careful argumentation and passionate feeling; insistently attentive to his subject. Urgent and heartfelt like Churchill's broadcasts, his talk had no histrionics. Neither actor nor performer in the usual senses of those words, he didn't treat us as audience, nor did he adopt the differentiated role of a preacher instructing the laity. He spoke, deliberately but not dogmatically, as a leading member in a community, opening his understanding of Hungary to and for himself and us, articulating his imaginative, passionate vision.

A family in our parish had 'adopted' two Hungarian teenagers and I had heard their terrible personal stories. One, whose father had died early from internal injuries after a Russian interrogation, left his boarding school and went to Budapest to do his violent bit in the uprising, was shot as he escaped from Hungary, but survived. Tibor was my rock-and-roll partner, and he often spoke about what happened to him, yet Vin's words enabled me to know and place the uprising more deeply even than direct testimony. I think, now, that was because he spoke as he lived, as a poet. His vision came from and prompted deep personal connection, thoughtful communion. At 18, I was even more overawed than delighted. In the following three years, that impression deepened as I heard Vin in the Newman Society and public talks.

In 1960, while I was doing my Diploma of Education and taking three tutorials a week in the English Department, Vin proposed me as a member of the NSV's Senior Men's Group. When it was objected (by my friend, that just man, Greg Armstrong) that I was not a man, Vin won the day by arguing that in his mind it was a *staff* group. It was a seriously intellectual and vital group, anticipating and sometimes going further than Vatican II and I'm still grateful for its richness. But as the sixties went on, and Franta Knopfelmacher became a stronger influence on Vin and the NSV's magazine, *Prospect*, our politics differed more and more. I backed the rival magazine *Dissent*, was strongly opposed to the war, and signed an early public protest against the bombing of North Vietnam. It pained me to watch Vin and others, on occasion, begin to exhibit a new attitude in the Senior Group and in public debate: partisan, polemical, aggressive and selectively informed. Thank God I never saw him like that within the Department or in our friendly personal talk. We discussed our differences a couple of times when I was driving him to and from the University, realised we were not going to agree and maintained our warm, companionable courtesies.

He gave me useful, politic counsel. 'Confession's about forgiveness. There's no point confessing what the priest or anyone else might think you've done wrong, only what you think are your sins.' 'When you've decided to do something, don't ask, inform.' 'That red is my favourite colour on you'. I wore it to his funeral. When I went up on to the Newman Chapel altar to read 'Shall these bones live?' I was momentarily winded by the wave of grief breaking on me from the packed congregation.

As a young tutor I remembered my own first, somewhat daunting experiences of Vin as I watched students respond to the invitation implicit in his person, presence and teaching. His lectures were an intellectual privilege. In them he germinated ideas that were tested and developed in tutorials and more general discussion, and then refined and expanded for

publication in *The Melbourne Critical Review*, *Poetry and Morality*, and, my own favourite, *Poetry and the Sacred*. He worked scrupulously to make complex material coherent and lucid. His teaching practice was personal, intense and mature, giving and demanding wholehearted attention.

Some students who just wanted to ‘get through’ English Two were miffed, even affronted by his eloquence. Others, to whom such articulate passion was strange, felt out of their depth, yet discovered in tutorials that his lectures had communicated more to them than they realised. Many began to learn the trick of the long-legged fly, poised on the stream of great literature moving in this poet’s words. In a few, admiration collapsed into imitation.

Every year many students revelled in his lectures and tutorials. When I was placing students in English Two tutorials I developed a system with inbuilt chanciness. It didn’t save me from a small but furious stream of students who felt discriminated against because it hadn’t put them into Vin’s classes.

I found strong continuities between his approach to literature and to religion. In both, he emphasised the vision he detects in T.S. Eliot’s *Little Gidding*: ‘Christian man is not man declaring, or man puzzling, but man wondering, capable of torment as much as joy’ (Buckley, *Sacred* 222). His rejections could be fierce: he loathed a ‘problem and answer,’ sin and punishment approach, because it reduced deep experiences to pat formulas, denying insight and diverse possibilities. Though he rejoiced in detecting rhythm and pattern, his damning terms were ‘diagrammatic’ and ‘formulaic.’ He denounced attempts to stuff mysterious realities into pre-set grids, ideologies, isms, and ists.

‘Paradoxical,’ ‘sacramental’ and ‘sacred’ were favourite words. An unillusioned truth-seeker, the consolations of religion and literature were incidental to him. His great impulse as poet, reader, teacher and critic was, to quote him again, ‘the need to know and to place the self.’ His teaching awoke or strengthened a similar disposition in students and colleagues: to join the communal effort to know and place each writer, and themselves, in relatedness.

Vin had a superb sense of the greatest moments in literature, and his readings communicated them wonderfully. But for my taste, his insistence on discrimination was too purely unrelenting. Having brilliantly defined the excellences of the writers he most admired, he went on to discriminate between their good, better and best, as if searching for an ultimate analogical epiphany, transcendence, transfiguration. For example, a lecture on *Four Quartets* culminated in his demonstration of the superior poetic quality of *Little Gidding* Part One over *Burnt Norton* Part One. He may well have been right, but my instinctive reaction was that if T. S. Eliot had stayed at the peak of *Little Gidding* we would have had barely one instead of four quartets.

Vin and I shared deep commonalities and our poetic preferences were very similar but we had strikingly different sensibilities.

I think he saw all literature through the prism of poetry: Shakespeare as poet rather than playwright, the poetic novels (*Wuthering Heights*, *Moby Dick*, and *Ulysses*). I also relished the novels (of Dickens, James, and Proust) which require the ups and downs of development. Perhaps, simply, he was essentially a poet who taught literature; I was essentially a reader-teacher.

He was an efficiently *democratic* head of English Two. At one point, there was a move to put drama back into the course. Vin opposed it, because the syllabus was already crowded, especially by long nineteenth century novels. In a society and university where power was increasingly centralised, he took it for granted that the issue should be decided by the votes of those teaching English Two, put his case strongly from the chair, lost the vote and supported the outcome.

In the early 1980s I left a wearily factionalised department where I felt that the better I taught English Two students, the tougher it could become for them in later years. Vin felt bitterly embattled. Yet he remained more inclusive than several other colleagues. Three final anecdotes about his generosity:

- I went to one of Maggie Tomlinson's regular early evening sherry get-togethers. I had learned a lot from Maggie, and regarded her as a supportive colleague who fostered newcomers' entry into the communal life of the department and a dear friend. It was put to me that I 'had a foot in both camps' because I spoke admiringly of Peter Steele's lectures and, worse, was close to Vin. I offered to leave, pointing out that Vin liked my affection for colleagues with whom his own relations were tense. The comments were quickly withdrawn, and I felt welcome to stay;
- In the seventies, a student who'd just got a first class degree in Literature came to ask me for a scholarship reference, because the then Head of Department had refused him one on the grounds that 'You are a Marxist and I don't want to advance Marxists.' I explained that a tutor's word would carry no weight in the scholarship cut and thrust, and suggested he go two rooms down the corridor to ask Vin for the reference. Shocked, he said, 'But Vin's not a Marxist.' I said 'Certainly not. Neither is he an ideologue. He's a pluralist.' The student wanted me to ring Vin to lobby for his support. I said it was unnecessary and sent him up the corridor. As I expected, Vin gave him the deserved fine reference;
- About that time, Vin was going away for some weeks. Observing the proper decorum, he approached the Head of Department (H) with the request that I take the Honours Poetry Seminar in his absence. The first I heard of it was when he recounted their exchange in his inimitable, impish way:

H: Why on earth do you want *her*?

Vin: Because I admire her teaching.

H: What is there to admire?

Vin: She has 'negative capability.'

H: You don't need to tell *me* about her negatives. The answer is No. No. No.

Tears came to my eyes, from laughter and disappointment, yet mainly because I was so moved by Vin's characterisation of my teaching. 'Negative capability' is the term Keats coined to describe: 'what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, *when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*' (43). Those words have guided my reading, learning and teaching ever since.

Lorna Hannan lovingly remembers that ‘when Vin looked at me, he gave me his full attention. It was wonderful. I really felt *seen*.’ Like her, and hundreds of others, I was privileged to experience him as he lived his vision in his many roles: as poet, lover, father, teacher and colleague. Above all I was privileged for him to be my dear and great friend.

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