

This Was a Man

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In the early 1960s I was driving only the second car I'd ever owned—an original FX Holden. Laurie, whom I met at Melbourne University at about that time, greatly admired this beaten up and slowly disintegrating vehicle. When I announced my intention to change to a motor bike Laurie offered me £100 for the FX but I thought he should take more account of its parlous condition and eventually we settled for £60. This represented £12.00 per working cylinder. Laurie became a familiar figure round the place in this hiccupping car—I don't think he ever did get that errant cylinder firing—and he drove it on and on for what seems like, from memory, years, but maybe was only months. Eventually, when to its growing unreliability were added harassments like registration, an insatiable taste for oil, and other annoyances, he drove it to some North Melbourne back street, removed all identifying traces, and simply walked away from it. Maybe it's still there!

It was my great good luck to land in the same English MA class as Laurie at Melbourne Uni. Normally I'd have been a few years earlier than him but because I'd been teaching in the bush I coincided with Laurie, the late Graham Burns and a number of other memorable characters in the class conducted jointly by Vincent Buckley and David Moody. In the most civilised and ritual manner the brilliant Buckley and the meticulous Moody agreed about almost nothing over the entire year. As we waited round the seminar table before Buckley and Moody arrived to start the weekly class, Laurie would often run a book on how soon the two would have a major disagreement—at the five minute mark, the six and a half minute mark, and so on. When a daring bet, like at the *two* minute mark, came good, a sort of *frisson* would run 'round the class to the puzzlement of the debating teachers and the stifled delight of the adventurous punter. Winners and losers settled their account in beers at the Mayfair after the two-hour class had ended. This was spot betting fifty years earlier than its contemporary and scandalous incarnation and—unlike the modern model—it was innocuous and great fun.

Laurie was a brilliant English student but he mostly hid this behind an amiably satiric front. He was diffident but actually in awe of nothing and nobody, so when he was asked to write a paper on Wordsworth's Lucy poems he ruthlessly exposed what the rest of us were thinking but not saying. He did this simply by quoting: so one of the more famous Lucy poems—'She dwelt among untrodden ways' with its celebrated last verse ('She lived unknown, and few could know/When Lucy ceased to be/But she is in her Grave, and, Oh/The difference to me') was rendered by Laurie in a syllable-hammering monotone: 'She lived un-known, and few could know/When Lu-cy ceased to be/But she-is-in-her-grave-and-OH/The diff-er-ence to me.' In this spectacular manner he proposed his critical view of Wordsworth's limitations.

When it was announced during the second term that our next text would be a collection entitled *Silver Poets of the Sixteenth Century*, Laurie asked Buckley and Moody if we would be able to move on to *Aluminium Poets of the Nineteenth Century* and take a look back at *Tin Poets of the Tenth*. Because these suggestions were made with that well-remembered long-faced seriousness and in his quietly insistent, persuasive tones, some didn't know quite how to take him, though Buckley and Moody were in no doubt whatsoever.

In those years I would attend many of the *Melbourne Partisan* executive meetings in the front bar of the Mayfair Hotel with the founding editors, John Timlin and Laurie. It was Laurie who gave me the *nom de plume* ‘Sniper.’ When the fortunately anonymous Sniper launched, as proposed by the editors, a take-no-prisoners attack on the Channel 9 and Channel 7 Footy Shows of those days, Laurie, posing as a cleaner, covertly distributed a few hundred copies round the foyer of each TV Studio. Channel 7 didn’t care but Tony Charlton at Channel 9 was furious and vowed to sink the *Partisan*. He wasn’t quick enough, however, and unionist Tom Dougherty beat him to the knockout punch.

Laurie’s editorial flair extended into his own funeral where, from the great beyond, he dictated its tone and content with explicit and in some cases hilarious instructions to ensure that the occasion would not be ‘dead serious.’ As he put it, he would do the dead bit, other people could do the jokes. But Laurie also added, for his son Joe to read, a beautiful and moving tribute to Neelam.

It’s so easy to remember and quote Laurie the wit and raconteur but it is important to remind ourselves also of some other truths: for example, that Laurie was an intent, solid batsman, a lanky, sort of flailing-limbed footballer, and a tennis player with an amazingly mysterious, distracting service style. But above all, he was a scholar. He was committed to literature and the word—on the page and in film. He was a fine, prize winning novelist and an accomplished writer of witty, sharp and probing short stories. He was a terrific deputy to John McLaren on *ABR* and, during John’s absence, a creative, innovative editor. He was a prolific, sharp, sympathetic reviewer and a wonderful literary critic. His Oxford University Press *Reader’s Guide to Australian Literature* is an astonishing succession of acute, perceptive short essays that still stand as some of the best stuff in the field. And there was as well, of course, Bystander Press—a self-imposed labour of love, excitement and daring.

So, while Laurie himself might have disapproved, it seems right and fitting to farewell him in literary terms—in this case, as Mark Antony saluted Brutus:

His life was gentle; and the elements
So mixed in him, that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, this was a man.