

Playing a Straight Bat: Laurie Clancy as Critic

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Laurie Clancy was already a lecturer at La Trobe University when I arrived there in 1970. In those heady days when universities were expanding rapidly, and there was a widely shared belief among both staff and students that the humanities mattered, teaching in an English department could be an exciting experience. The La Trobe English staff was young and enthusiastic, ready to try out new ideas about teaching and assessment, and staff meetings could be lively—and even acrimonious—as everyone had their say. What I quickly learned was that Laurie was a colleague who was easy to work with: he was a voice of reason at staff meetings; eschewed the factionalism that seemed to bedevil English departments in Australia during those years; and could always be relied upon to take a practical approach to things. Unfailingly sociable and never less than co-operative, with a strong sense of *esprit de corps*, he was a stalwart in the department, generous with his time in his dealings with both staff and students. As a teacher he was readily accessible to students, willing to spend time with them, mindful of their welfare, and full of encouragement for those who showed promise. My memory is that he was never less than busy, but never asked for relief or special favours to get more time for himself. He did not shirk the various administrative chores that came his way, handling them with a minimum of fuss, and sat on committees when it was required of him. Conscientious though he was about his university responsibilities, he did not spend more time on campus than he needed to, because he lived a double life, somehow managing to reconcile being a full-time academic with being a creative writer and journalist. Within a few years of his going to La Trobe he was probably the best-known member of the English department, with a solid reputation as a fiction writer and as a reviewer as well as an academic.

My first encounter with Laurie was in his capacity as a critic. In 1968 I gave a paper on Australian literary criticism at a UNESCO conference in Sydney. Conference-going had not yet developed into a form of academic tourism, and there was only limited contact between academics in different institutions within Australia, let alone overseas. I was then at the University of Western Australia, and did not know many of the younger academics in ‘the Eastern states’ (that much-used West Australian phrase). Had I been in Melbourne during the 1960s I’d have probably known about Laurie’s editorship of *Farrago*, the student newspaper at Melbourne University, and later his founding of the *Melbourne Partisan*. I knew nothing of his stoush in that journal with the General Secretary of the Australian Workers’ Union, which led to a defamation threat that could have gone badly for Laurie had it not been for what he liked to think of as divine intervention that removed his opponent from the scene. As far as I was concerned, ‘L. J. Clancy’ was no more than the name of a contributor to *Meanjin*, whose article on Tom Keneally I mentioned approvingly in my talk.

After the session Clem Christesen introduced the tall, well-built, affable young man who had been sitting beside him at the back of the room; and so I met the said L. J. Clancy. I think that Clem then had in mind the possibility that Laurie might be interested in taking on the editorship of *Meanjin*. Laurie would have been well qualified for the job: he shared Clem’s liberal-democratic outlook, he was not only a creative writer but also a critic with an extensive knowledge of Australian literature; and he was already experienced as a journal editor. Towards the end of his editorship Clem was attracted by the gathering at La Trobe of a number of

enthusiastic young academics with a strong interest in Australian literature, and he toyed with the notion that the journal might be able to move to the new university. Eventually, however, it was Jim Davidson who succeeded Clem in 1975, and the new editor named Laurie as one of the Consultants. A few years later—I think it was in 1978—when the *Australian Book Review* was established, with John McLaren as editor, Laurie took on the deputy editorship; but it was unsurprising that he could not continue for long because of his other commitments.

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Apart from novels and collections of short stories, Laurie's list of book publications includes five non-fiction titles—*The Last Romantic: the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov* (1973), *Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children* and *'For Love Alone'* (1981), *Xavier Herbert* (1981), *A Reader's Guide to Australian Fiction* (1982), and *Culture and Customs of Australia* (2004). This list, while indicating major interests, doesn't suggest the size of his critical output, as so much of his writing was in the form of lectures, articles, book notes and reviews, which have not been collected. In a period when the academic discussion of literature was becoming more and more arcane and self-enclosed, Laurie exemplified the academic who was comfortable in writing for the so-called 'common reader'—that is, the reader with an intelligent interest in literature but no specialised knowledge, and no involvement in the critical debate. Not less an academic when writing as a journalist, he bridged the gap between the academy and the public in a way that comparatively few Australian academics have managed to do.

Generally speaking, academics find it easier to write for their peers rather than for the wider public. At various times in the past there have been teachers of literature—Walter Murdoch, for instance—who have established a rapport with the general public. There has probably never been a period when Australian newspapers allowed more space for literary criticism than in the early years of last century. Murdoch (as 'Elzivir' writing a weekly column, 'Books and Men,' in the Melbourne *Argus*) and his Melbourne University colleague Archibald T. Strong (in the Melbourne *Herald*) regularly produced extended articles and reviews of current literature. Strong's pieces are formal and impersonal essays and read rather like a rehash of lecture notes. Murdoch's are more relaxed in style, more personal, and sometimes even chatty; a century later they still succeed in engaging the reader. Murdoch talked about books in a companionable way, sharing his views with the reader, not talking down or claiming to be an authority. He went on to become an essayist with an enduring reputation, and for many years wrote a regular column, 'Answers,' in the Melbourne *Herald*, edited by his nephew.

Comparatively few academic journalists have been as successful as Murdoch in reaching the sort of reader who wants to know more about a book than he gets from the blurb on the cover. In a talk he once gave on the relationship between authors and publishers, Laurie remarked apropos of his novel, *Perfect Love*: 'I am utterly convinced that most reviewers were deeply influenced by the blurb, and reviewed that instead of the novel.' That was a dereliction of duty that he was never guilty of. He read the books under review with great care, he thought about them, and he tried to give a fair account of them. As with Murdoch generations before, he wrote plainly and with evident sincerity, offering the reader a thoughtful view that was unmistakably his own. It is often a challenge to persuade a reader to share your interest in the work you are writing about, especially the reader who is not equipped (or burdened) by your knowledge of literature and does not share your ideological disposition. Academic reviewers sometimes can't resist the temptation to act like peacocks and put on a display of their erudition rather helping the reader to appreciate the book that they are supposed to be discussing.

Laurie was a modest, generous and open-minded reviewer, never thrusting himself forward, but at the same time never hiding his feelings, and always saying what he thought. From his university studies in English at Melbourne he had learnt the virtue of close reading, but he was never in thrall to any fashionable doctrines. He did show some interest in studying developments in contemporary literary theory while at La Trobe, but essentially his was a humanist approach to literature: he was always his own man. Patrick White once deplored Australian academics, saying that they weren't interested in anything that wasn't a hundred years old. That complaint could not have been made of Laurie. He read extensively in twentieth century literature, and kept abreast of the new; and often his colleagues found themselves turning to his reviews to learn about the latest Australian and American fiction.

In the small literary world of Australia novelists may find themselves passing judgment on the work of fellow-novelists, even close friends, and that can present problems. Laurie was never less than honest in saying what he thought, even when dealing with the work of friends. To take a small instance: in the course of a substantial and detailed review of *The Doubleman* by Christopher Koch, a friend and one of the Australian novelists whom he most admired, he remarks: 'There are so many good and interesting things in this novel that it hurts to have to say that (for me at any rate) it doesn't finally come off' (*Age*, 18 May 1985). His own experience as a creative writer made him a sympathetic reader of fiction but he remained a critic with standards. An admirer of Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*, which he thought 'an achievement unique in Australian fiction', he did not pull his punches when it came to *Poor Fellow My Country*: 'its status in the country's national literature will in the years to come be that of a curiosity, a kind of literary brontosaurus, *Poor Bugger My Book*' (*Xavier Herbert* 132). One can say that as a critic Laurie always recognised that his first responsibility was to his readers. He never shortchanged them.

Laurie's tone in his newspaper articles was always serious, certainly never frivolous, but as his friends—and readers of *The Wildlife Reserve*—know, he had a keen sense of the absurd. Occasionally he indulged his liking for a joke by way of making a serious point. He must have had a grin on his face when he wrote the final sentence of his review of a García Márquez novel: '*Love in the Time of Cholera* is, if nothing else, an extraordinarily adventurous novel whose author refuses to rest on his achievement but prefers to risk falling flat on his farce' (*Weekend Australian* 12-13 November 1988). Reviewing Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, he described it as 'even more recondite and more allusive, more dauntingly intellectual' than *The Name of the Rose*, and concluded: 'Since it is impossible to take in much at one reading I will be going back to it and reading it again, but not yet, O Lord, not yet' (*Age* 9 December 1989). Fellow Catholics, in particular, must have enjoyed reading that sentence. Perhaps only Melbourne readers would have appreciated fully this comment about literary prizes for special categories: 'What will we have next? Prizes for writers who are more than 2m tall? Who have brown hair and blue eyes? Who barrack for Collingwood Football Club?' (*Australian* 23 July 1989).

Looking over Laurie's critical work—I cannot pretend to have read everything he wrote, but I have recently re-read a number of his reviews in newspapers and journals, as well as articles in critical journals—I am struck by two things: the extent of his critical reach; and the sureness of his judgments. He was extraordinarily prolific at the same time as he was extraordinarily steady in performance. I tend to think of Laurie as an *Age* reviewer, as it was in the pages of that Melbourne institution that I first read so many of his reviews; but his work appeared in a number of newspapers and critical journals—those that come immediately to mind are the *Age*, *Australian*, *Australian Book Review*, *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), *Island Magazine* (Hobart),

Meanjin and *Overland* (both Melbourne), *Southern Review* (Adelaide). As well, for over forty years, beginning in 1967, he wrote notes for book discussion groups of the Council of Adult Education in Melbourne; and he contributed entries to such survey publications as *Contemporary Novelists*. All this was in addition to his lectures, which covered a wide range of English, Australian and American literature, along with foreign novels in translation that found their way into English courses. He was so deeply interested in South American novelists that he began at one stage to learn Spanish; and one of his most important articles was a study of Vargas Llosa's *Autumn of the Patriarch*, which was published in *Antipodas*.

As one would expect, Laurie was especially interested in contemporary fiction; but it is the breadth of his interest that should be emphasised. That is what enabled him to write his guide to Australian fiction, a survey in which he treated earlier writers with the same care as the more recent. He was responsive not only to Australian writers of his own time—both older writers like John Morrison and Christina Stead as well as the more recent like Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley, Peter Mathers and Murray Bail, to name just a few—but equally to those of the past. His fascination with sophisticated and experimental writers in the twentieth century, which led to his writing a thesis on Nabokov, did not preclude an interest in a minor colonial writer like Charles de Boos. Laurie admired the heroic efforts of Victor Crittenden to bring such work back into circulation, and he contributed an introduction to a Mulini Press reprint of de Boos's *Fifty Years Ago*, originally published about 1867, a work that he thought 'one of the most powerful and neglected of all colonial fictions.' 'Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of "liking" a work of art or not liking it,' wrote Henry James long ago. Perhaps all critics write best when they 'like' the work they are dealing with. That is probably true of Laurie, but he always gives the impression that he is trying to say whatever he can that is positive, while making it clear exactly where he stands. Often towards the end of a review he writes something like 'If I have a criticism, it is ...,' and then details what seem to him to be shortcomings. In my experience this approach—the opposite of that taken by the sort of reviewer who takes pleasure in triumphing over the creative writer—strengthens one's confidence in the judgments offered. Laurie's book reviews are persuasive and satisfying because they offer a balanced appraisal based on a real engagement with the text.

A newspaper review of Janette Turner Hospital's novel, *Charades*, will serve as an example of how he went about his job as a reviewer. It begins by characterising the novel as thriving on 'uncertainties, speculation, hypotheses, in both its theme and style.' This is followed by a reflection on the movement in twentieth century literature 'from a fear and dread of uncertainty to its acceptance and finally even celebration, as in the works of writers such as Milan Kundera and Umberto Eco.' Having placed the novel in this way, the review goes on to discuss the handling of the theme, and sums up:

Charades is many things—the account of a wanderer and a search, a psychological thriller, a rewriting of *A Thousand and One Nights*, to which many allusions are made. Above all, it is a beautifully written narrative, one which like several other recent novels, such as *Out of the Line of Fire* and Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*, works retrospectively.

An illustration of Hospital's 'flair for the striking phrase' leads to the familiar demurrer: 'If there is a criticism of the novel it is that at times the author appears to have taken on too much in the way of themes and motifs,' which 'can result in a kind of intellectual promiscuity.' Finally, the approving judgment, delivered with a characteristically wry twist: 'Nevertheless,

Charades is an example of that old-fashioned, almost extinct phenomenon, the novel you can't put down' (*Age* 24 September 1988).

As a practitioner of the art, Laurie brought to his criticism an inside knowledge of fiction, and that makes what he had to say about novels and short stories especially valuable. However, his reviewing was not confined to fiction. In his earlier years he wrote about films, but I don't recall his being a drama critic. He did, however, write—and write well—about poetry and poets. His review of David Moody's study (*Thomas Stearns Eliot: Poet*) is far superior to most book reviews one reads in newspapers and journals. The final, deeply considered paragraph is, I think, as close as Laurie comes to a *credo* in his journalism, and I quote it in full:

... I am not a believer, generally speaking, in Edmund Wilson's Freudian theory of the wound and the bow, of art as the product of deep-seated neurosis. Great art seems to me more likely to come as a rule from men of great plenitude and appetite for life, and to think otherwise is one of the great fallacies of our self-pitying century. But in Eliot's case, the theory does seem almost uncannily accurate; the art was an act of both rationalization and therapy. Moody's admirable book leaves me with a sort of chilled awe at the heroic sublimation by which such a maimed sensibility could produce such a formidable body of work. (*Age*, 26 January 1980)

Such writing represents Laurie at his best and deserves to be preserved.

III

This impressionistic account of Laurie's criticism, based on no more than a sampling, may suggest something of its scope and its distinguishing qualities, but it hardly does him justice. I have concentrated on the uncollected writing because it is most likely to be overlooked. Laurie's life was cut short, and one can but regret that he never had time to look over the enormous amount of journalism he produced, to reflect and rework into a more permanent form pieces that are by necessity ephemeral. Major reviews like that of the Eliot book could have been collected in book form. It would have been good, too, if he had had the opportunity to rework some of the reviews of individual novels into extended essays on the authors, and to have presented his personal perspective on fiction without the constraints imposed by editors.

At least one of his pieces of journalism has been preserved in a most prestigious form. In 1969, when he was in the United States as a Harkness Fellow, Laurie met Kurt Vonnegut, just after *Slaughterhouse Five*, the novel that established Vonnegut's reputation, had been published. He persuaded Vonnegut to agree to an interview—which lasted five hours, and ended only when the American decided that it was time for a martini. A version of the interview, along with a perceptive article on Vonnegut's fiction by Laurie, appeared in *Meanjin* (no. 1 of 1971). In 1991, when a festschrift was being prepared for Vonnegut in America, the author expressly requested that the interview with the young Australian be included. A copy of the festschrift volume was the book which Laurie was most proud to possess.

As his colleague for over a quarter of a century, I have some idea of how much Laurie achieved as a writer and academic. He had hoped to be a full-time creative writer; and it was sad that after he retired from La Trobe circumstances thwarted his hopes of being able to concentrate on writing stories and novels. But, though it was fiction rather than criticism that he most wanted to write, his non-fiction should not be under-valued. I suspect that journalists are born, not made; and Laurie was certainly a most accomplished journalist, unfazed by the pressure of

deadlines that would have caused most of his colleagues to have nervous breakdowns. The writing that he did under journalistic pressures has the same integrity, the same balance and judgment, that characterise the rest of his critical writing.

Laurie was typically Australian in his love of sport, especially cricket. He played regularly at weekends, often appearing in the English department on Monday mornings with a sunburnt face. His literary and sporting interests came together once a year when he captained the *Meanjin* team for the annual match with *Overland*. I can't offer any assessment of Laurie's performance as a batsman, but a cricketing metaphor just about sums up my view of his performance as a teacher and critic: he played a straight bat.