

Remembering Ron Dunlop (1916–2009)

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I have fond memories of Ron Dunlop, who was very kind to me when I took up my first lectureship at Sydney, aged 21. He was always impeccably polite, always generous, always friendly. He had a somewhat military appearance, clipped moustache, blazer. He had served in New Guinea in the Second World War and had been involved in the post-war war crimes trials of the Japanese. The war experiences were said to have curtailed his early promise as a poet and critic. If you look at the early issues of *Southerly*, you can find some of those poems. In the times I knew him he no longer wrote verse. But he broadcast regularly on the ABC's book review programme. And he was a stalwart of *Poetry Australia*, the poetry magazine edited by Grace Perry after she broke away from the Poetry Society. A splendid eccentric, poet and GP, it was Grace who asked me to persuade Bob Adamson (who in another coup took over the Poetry Society's magazine) to have a quick snip of his pineal gland to calm him down; he refused. Ron used to organize the book reviews for Grace, and recruited reviewers from those in the department who stooped to read contemporary poetry in those days.

Ron gave me one piece of invaluable advice. It was the same advice that the Duke of Windsor claimed was the only useful thing his father ever told him. Never pass a pissoir. Ron supported his argument with an anecdote about his good friend and colleague Gus Cross. Gus, after his habitual lunch at the staff club bar, suddenly had to rush out from his lecture, claiming some missing notes or an urgent phone call, and headed for the hole in the wall in the Quadrangle.

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He was necessarily in something of a hurry, and on his return to the lecture dais, his shoes were noticeably sprinkled with moisture, much to the amusement of the assembled students.

There was much to entertain students in those days. Ron, like Gus, was a great enthusiast for Willie Yeats, as he fondly referred to him. Probably trapped too long at the bar one time, he began his lecture on Yeats, only to find that he had forgotten to bring along the volume of letters in which he had marked the passages to quote. The story goes that he gave the lecture nevertheless without the quotations, and the following week read the passages themselves without repeating the context, to the bemusement of his students.

One of the Sydney traditionalists, Ron was not much appreciated by the Leavisite regime then in power. Nor, in due course, was I, although that was the regime that had appointed me.

One of the principles of the Leavisites was a focus on the words on the page. They rejected the paraphrases and remote listings of literary history and required a close reading of the text, a rigorous analysis and exquisite savouring of the texture of the poetry or prose. Teaching works in translation seemed somewhat to contradict this emphasis on the word, the letter, over the idea, but nonetheless, classical Greek drama in translation was a specialty of Maggie Tomlinson, one of the Leavisites arrived from Melbourne. It became a focus of dispute, even if not always vocalized, one of the many sites of objection to the Leavisite faction from the resistant members of the department that Sam Goldberg had inherited.

I was drinking in the staff club bar one lunch time with Ron. He was one of the regulars there. So, I suppose, was I. No doubt we had stayed in the bar too long. We noticed on the floor, placed there to mop up some spillage or other, the pages of a newspaper in Chinese characters.

'Must be Maggie's lecture notes', we quipped.

A few more middies later we salvaged the paper and stuck it in her pigeon-hole when we went back to the department, with a scribbled note repeating our aperçu. She was not amused. I was summoned to explain myself to the other literature professor. 'They act like they're early Christian martyrs', was his only comment to

me. I don't know what he said to Ron.

Back in Sydney after two years at Birmingham, I faced the problem of what car I should buy. The question was answered with extraordinary generosity by Ron. He gave me his Humber Super Snipe. No small gift this, but a huge, long, stately black limousine. Like a military staff car. My first act on returning to the department, the first morning, had been to join in an anti-war protest on the university front lawn. Then as now, and in between, were the days of imperialist wars, opposed by most of the population. In those days anti-war protestors often wore army surplus clothing. Radical chic, it was called. The staff car image may have been similarly paradoxical for a pacifist, but what was wrong with paradox? It was a marvellous car.

All Ron asked was to keep his number plate. 'No way I can remember a new one', he said, as we stood at the staff club bar, in those days before the university abolished the staff club. He kept his personalized number plate, I took the car. What a gem. It was long and sometimes a bit unwieldy. Nearly demolished the verandah of the Forth and Clyde hotel in Balmain one Saturday evening, misjudging the bend. Girls from those years still come up to me, recalling being given a lift. It was a huge car, lots of people could pack into it for a lift to a party, impossible to remember them all.

But I still remember Ron Dunlop.