

The Short Stories Of Laurie Clancy

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At his death, on 16 July 2010, Laurie Clancy left a folder of 100 stories, maybe to see what posterity would make of them. This contained unpublished material, besides pieces that had appeared in newspapers, magazines and journals. There were also copies of the 57 stories that had been published in his three collections of short fiction. These were *The Wife Specialist* (1979) (its title from the first story by Clancy to be published—in *Westerly* in 1971), *City and Country* (1989) and *Loyalties* (2007). Now there is a fourth gathering, *Jovial Harbinger of Doom: Selected Stories by Laurie Clancy*. These have been ‘selected and edited’ by his friend and former La Trobe University colleague, Richard Freadman.

Arranged thematically into eight sections (which to a degree represent a chronological progression as well), there are 44 stories, grouped as ‘Catholic Childhood,’ ‘Student Days,’ ‘A Dog Eat Bone World: Academic Life,’ ‘The Literary Life,’ ‘Burdened by Freedom,’ ‘Sweet Deceit Comes Calling: Intimacy, Mateship and Betrayal,’ ‘Family and Estrangement’ and ‘Later Life.’ In addition—and on its own in the section called ‘All Done and Said’—is ‘The Auto-Eulogy,’ that Clancy prepared to be read at his own funeral. The Freadman edition has been used for the following discussion of the short stories of Laurie Clancy.

What the edition allows us to see, among other things and by implication, is the extent of recent critical neglect of Clancy’s work. There is much of it to consider (although Freadman’s preference is for the stories): novels, including the first, *A Collapsible Man* (1975), *Perfect Love* (1983) (for Freadman ‘the most successful of the novels’) and *The Wildlife Reserve: A Tale of One Campus* (1994), La Trobe University’s only campus novel; four books of criticism, including short monographs on Christina Stead and Xavier Herbert, and a longer one on Vladimir Nabokov, and a *Readers’ Guide to Australian Fiction* (1992).

In addition, as Freadman notes in his Introduction, there is ‘a vast, as yet uncounted number of literary reviews and occasional pieces.’ Yet there was no mention of Clancy in *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1998), nor in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009). Some of his contemporary authors of short fiction, notably Frank Moorhouse and Michael Wilding, have received more critical appraisal than Clancy, though not to the extent of novelists who have enjoyed similarly long careers. With such exceptions as Bruce Bennett and Stephen Torre, contemporary Australian short fiction has not engaged our critics at length. Until the recent work of Paul Eggert, even Henry Lawson has been in partial eclipse for decades.

Clancy’s careers as an academic and an author of fiction ran in tandem from their beginnings. Educated by the Christian Brothers in St Kilda, he went up to Melbourne University in the early 1960s, where he majored in English Literature. While tutoring in the English Department, he won a Harkness Fellowship that enabled him to travel

for a year in 1970 in the United States (it is called the Trevalen in several of the stories that issued from that experience). Later he was appointed Lecturer in English at the recently established La Trobe University, where he remained until retiring as a Senior Lecturer.

After he left La Trobe, Clancy sustained academic contacts from 2008 with part-time teaching in Creative Writing at the RMIT University. His diagnosis with throat cancer the following year ended Clancy's hopes for at last working full-time as a writer. The dual career that he had enjoyed set him in a distinguished tradition in Australian letters, albeit one whose members are wildly assorted. It extends from Christopher Brennan to Brenda Walker, and includes such poet professors as AD Hope, James McAuley, Vincent Buckley and Peter Steele; Wilding and Margaret Scott. Into their company came Clancy, 'a refugee from a stern Catholic childhood,' 'tall and angular with huge ruckman's hands, bulbous eyes and a "bog-Irish" face'—in Freadman's genial description.

As a young man of not yet twenty, Clancy had come to the English department of Melbourne University, an institution within the wider one. Confident in their own prowess, many of its members were also convinced that an English university (well, Cambridge) was the necessary next stage for young men and women of promise. Taking another undergraduate degree was also recommended, as though the local BA—fine as it might be—was still inferior. This was a department where a majority of the staff wholeheartedly adopted the literary preferences and the sense of literature's moral importance of the Cambridge don, FR Leavis. Believing in Mathew Arnold's dictum that 'literature is the criticism of life,' Leavis offered not only a secular faith based on the close reading of a narrow canon of texts, but a vocabulary that was shared among his followers like a liturgy. Not long after Clancy took up his academic appointment at La Trobe, its English department (and its journal, *Meridian*) were on the way to becoming the last redoubts of Leavisism in an Australian university.

Freadman notes that 'Australian academics brought Leavisite methods to bear upon texts that Leavis would never have admitted into his strict, morally serious canon of great works.' In particular he has in mind Clancy's book on a Russian-American author, *The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (1984). It is in some of his short stories, by turns poignant and funny, that Clancy made his most nuanced reckoning with Leavis. His inwardness with the effects of the sage on his antipodean acolytes gave depth and pungency to such stories as 'Spinning Jenny' and 'The Academic Dinner Party.' The first is told by Davenel (Dave), who chastely worships Jenny, a fellow member of his Fourth Year Honours class in literature. She becomes the lover of their professor, Gerard, whose wife is allegedly a semi-invalid. In a world where the urge to professional advancement overcomes even sexual desire (although both can be at the expense of students), the professor takes a chair in England. Dave wins a PhD scholarship to (where else?) Cambridge. Before he leaves, Jenny comes to see him and reads from notes that she had made of a lecture by Gerard on DH Lawrence. The Leavisite vocabulary recited here cruelly mocks the damage inflicted upon her: 'the liberal tradition,' 'life-affirming,' 'the whole mutuality of love.'

In the set piece called 'The Academic Dinner Party,' a young and nervous Terry Shaw, who has just been appointed as a tutor in the English department, is invited to a party at the home of David Manners, his professor and departmental head. Manners's

‘tastes, like his mind. were orthodox but sound and thorough.’ Above all he is alert to the lines that Leavis has taken. Yeats, Eliot and Lawrence have featured in Manners’s criticism ‘but most of his solid critical achievement has been in thoroughly established, indisputable classics—Milton (returned to eminence after Eliot’s depredations), Pope, Auden, Dickens (similarly rehabilitated after Leavis changed his mind—was nothing sacred?).’ When the leader alters tack, followers have to set their course accordingly.

Also at the party is Professor Poussin, head of the French department, who reveals that not only does he not scruple at revealing the names of student protestors to the authorities (something that Manners has disdained), but that he is in the business of seeking a chair elsewhere: “‘I don’t mean in Australia, I mean a real one”, Poussin said carelessly, “In England”.’ For all the deft social comedy of the story (a triumphant take on wine snobbery and on the excessively polite language of critical condemnation of others that Leavis fostered, among much else) this is another account of the damage wrought by academic ambition. This time the sufferer is Poussin’s senior lecturer, Harold Pitts, who will be passed over if the local chair becomes vacant. The impulse towards a supposedly more real intellectual life in England is one that Clancy dissects with asperity, but it is not something that ever tempted him.

Nor was he tempted to return, even at life’s end, to the Catholic faith of his childhood. On the evidence of the stories in the first part of Freadman’s selection, Clancy was less marked by those formative years than many of the contemporary authors who shared his institutional background. The remembering of ‘Catholic Childhood’ is where many careers, in Australia and overseas, have begun. A perfunctory list of locals would include Thomas Keneally (who left the seminary at Manly just before the completion of his vows), Gerald Murnane and Gerard Windsor, Ron Blair (author of the play *The Christian Brothers*, first performed in 1975, published the next year), Peter Kenna, Barry Oakley and Amanda Lohrey. For Lohrey, Catholic school days have been the subject of memoir rather than fiction.

The eight Clancy stories on this theme that Freadman has gathered are out of the common run. It is almost as if they insist on how little (except for the matter of sexual ignorance—see ‘Norwegian Wood’: ‘the first time I failed to lose my virginity was in 1965’) Clancy’s protagonists were touched by their education. The first of them, ‘How’s the Little Girl?’ is a about a trans-sectarian milieu—the pub, the punt, the paperboy (seller of the *Last Race All Sport Herald*) and his desire for a bike. The second, ‘Uncle Dave’s Funeral’ sees the Catholic service usurped by two old digger mates of Dave from the last war. Father Beldam is soon relegated in these proceedings. Not so the child protagonist, Sam Green, who is the first of those characters who will make multiple appearances in Clancy’s stories.

He is there again as a child in ‘Showing’ and ‘Gambling,’ as an older student in ‘The *Macbeth* Performance’ (which nods with amusement and respect to CJ Dennis: ‘Hegerty sprang to his feet. “Six to four, *Macbeth*,” he yelled. He hadn’t read the play’). Later Sam is seen during university holidays while he works at a bottle shop in Dromana in ‘First Love.’ In ‘Home After Twelve Months Away,’ he is a revenant, back from his Trevalen Fellowship (that is also, confusingly, held by another recurrent character, Graham Rice) to Melbourne on a hot Cup Day. To his boisterous

family, surrounding him at a barbecue, he gives a thoughtful but unappreciated response to the question of what he liked and disliked about the United States.

‘Living with the De Stoops’ also takes us back there with him to the house of a rich family who live outside Los Angeles. In one of the shortest and most telling stories in the book, ‘Access,’ Sam (alone and seemingly bereft himself) overhears a man addressing his son in a Vietnamese restaurant. The father hectors: “‘What she’s doing is wicked ... It’s against the Bible”,’ but the son—speaking to himself—has the poignant last words: “‘I don’t think mum is wicked”.’ Sam Green and Graham Rice are shambling, accident-prone, resilient Everyman figures, whether we encounter them at home or abroad. The temptation (that Clancy perhaps encourages) is too easily to read back from those fictional characters into the life of the author.

The stories grouped in ‘Catholic Childhood’ reveal Clancy’s unflashy technical skills and an enviable ease with dialogue that lets him readily range across registers of class, religion and education. As Freadman comments: ‘Laurie could write the range—from pub staff to the professoriate.’ In ‘Showing,’ the vacant block next door to the Greens’ house becomes a building site. Sam is entranced by the secret spaces that the stages of construction offer. One evening he reports to his mother that “‘the fuckin’ brickies didn’t front”.’ Despite his father’s protests, Sam’s mouth is washed out with soap. This was his mother’s decision: ‘With her own frustrated histrionic instincts she would always tell when a fellow performer was playing to an audience.’

There is a coda to this story and it introduces one of the signal aspects of Clancy’s narrative craft. ‘Many years later,’ Sam meets Judy Gleeson (Anketell that was and the girl from next door) who tells him enigmatically that her brother ‘went north,’ ‘Roger went to the other side.’ The sudden shift that changes our sense of what has gone before (a technique often employed by Henry Lawson) never strikes us as forced or incongruous. In ‘Gambling’ Sam is rewarded for returning the betting slips of an SP bookie. His father (a punter) comments that ‘Old Jock must be in trouble to go back to the game. He’s been inside already for starting price stuff.’ And then this flourish concludes the business: “‘son ... do you think you could lend me five bob?’”

This kick after the siren (as Clancy might have conceived it), the sting in the tale of the last sentence or paragraph that alters the balance of a story, is not the only indication of Clancy’s affinity with Lawson. There are, for instance the comically staged funerals where delinquent mourners forget their solemn duties to the one about to be interred (think of ‘The Union Buries Its Dead’). This is, of course, behaviour that Clancy himself encouraged with ‘The Auto-Eulogy’ with which this book concludes. As he wrote there, ‘over the last few years I’ve been to a number of funerals, though I must admit not usually as a guest of honour, as it were.’ And he added (having made sure that this would not be the case for him) that the guest ‘never gets to speak for himself; he also never gets to hear all the beautiful lies that people tell about him in his absence.’ Clancy had instructed the organisers of his funeral, his friends Brian Matthews and John Timlin, that ‘he would do the dead bit, [they] had to do the jokes.’

The sketch—that swift impression of place or character that Lawson perfected—is not within Clancy’s compass. However, and in common with a number of Lawson’s characters, some of those whom Clancy invented were practised in those polished,

often iterated tales for public performance called yarns (rather than lies). There are several fine essays in the form in *Jovial Harbinger of Doom*, for instance ‘The Man Who Would Be a Fish,’ as told by Sam Purcell in a pub 400km west of Melbourne. As the narrator/auditor comments, ‘Ridiculous as the story had been there had been a wealth of circumstantial detail, an absence of hyperbole that made it different from the earlier yarns.’

A significant aspect of this story (as the last comment indicates) is how it shows Clancy testing his craft as a writer of short fiction. This he did strenuously if unobtrusively throughout his career. For instance, in ‘Commitment’—another of Clancy’s ventures into the master theme of realist fiction: adultery (which prompts Freadman’s biographical musing—‘what was all that compulsive sexual treachery about?’)—Doctor Henry has an affair with the nurse Ellen Dain. Clancy’s method is reflexive: ‘Change to the present tense in the interests of narrative urgency.’ The doctor’s wife, Helen, discovers the affair and kicks him out, and the narrative prompt is ‘Return to a slower, more leisurely form of narration in the historic past.’ This physician fails to heal himself, succumbing to cancer: ‘Once she realised he was actually dying [Helen] had repossessed him’ but so—in a familiar final twist for Clancy—had the nurse. This story, by the way, is one of several hostages to fortune in the collection, tales of fatal illnesses and their consequences that presaged his own. ‘Commitment’ occurs in that gathering Freadman labels ‘Sweet Deceit Comes Calling,’ the connection of the parts of whose sub-title are analysed sharply and sometimes sourly. They are ‘Intimacy, Mateship and Betrayal.’

In the ruefully comic sketch, ‘Sex and the Single Luncher,’ the narrator, who is one of Clancy’s many versions of the author, is stood up by a publisher’s editor at a Carlton restaurant. Before he is befriended by a group of six women with whom he is partially acquainted, and the story turns to burlesque, Clancy focuses on the writer’s efforts to manage a combination of humiliation and anxiety:

It is now one-twenty-five and she is 55 minutes late but I feel she will turn up.
I suffer from a case of advanced optimism.
I consult the menu for the eleventh time.
I reflect.
I am writing like Morris Lurie.

As indeed he is—but this is rather an affectionate recognition of Lurie as a master diagnostician of stress, than mockery. Elsewhere—as in ‘Living with the De Stoops’—he experiments by advancing a story through sub-headings, as though revealing a work in progress, whose temporary structure will later be subsumed. Clancy was restless and innovative. He neither sought nor found a comfortable fictional groove in which to operate, and relax.

Thus it ought not to be a surprise to come upon ‘The Culture and Customs of Harbhistan’ (also supposedly the title of the monograph by the unnamed anthropologist who is the ingenuous narrator). In this inventive frolic (also divided into sub-headings, as if they are chapters to be), Clancy makes up a whole country in half a dozen pages. Some of his contemporaries have taken a book for such enterprises—for instance, Peter Carey with *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994)

and Nicholas Hasluck in *The Country Without Music* (1990). Harbhistan is a country without anywhere to sit down, ruled by Nassar Alhan, who seized power when he was sixteen and whose Bible is called 'Obama' ('little beach' in the local language).

Not all of Clancy's unwary travellers survive their excursions abroad (see the tense story about a twice married couple called 'In Barcelona'), but this one does. His last words, and the story's, are 'No one I interviewed had a bad word to say about [the dictator], in fact no one would say anything at all.' Deadpan does the trick here. Closer to home, though, a surfeit of sheep and underarm bowling jokes undo 'Unique to New Zealand,' despite the cleverly hinted at reversal of marital fortunes with which it concludes. After all, no substantial selection of stories such as this will be of even quality. What is worthy of note is how fine many of them are, and how resistant to easy categorisation.

For instance, Clancy is not readily to be pigeon holed as a satirist. There is no reforming impulse in the stories, even as they castigate the cruelties and the drive to power within universities (rather than, as might have been expected, the Catholic church). Clancy's protagonists are most often woebegone and resigned to their fates, rather than active agents in exposing social ills. The point perhaps becomes clearer if we think of Clancy's campus fictions. Australia has not many of these to show. They include Keneally's *The Survivor* (1969), Don Aitkin's *The Second Chair* (1977), Louis Nowra's *Abaza: A Modern Encyclopaedia* (2001) (James Cook University at Cairns's only campus novel), the vignette that opens Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002), Michael Wilding's uproarious and rancour-driven pair, *Academia Nuts* (2002) and *Superfluous Men* (2009). In Clancy's view, 'Academic Life' is a given, it is 'A Dog Eats Bone World,' in which ambition and its accomplice treachery are to be expected; in which critical fashion will be embraced as the means to preferment. As a concomitant, the interests of the weaker, whether students or junior staff members, will be trampled upon. By implication, Clancy's stories (and his novel *The Wildlife Reserve*) seem to be asserting that there is nothing satirical, although much that is lamentable, in these depictions.

Much the same stance is adopted in the stories in 'The Literary Life.' This section of the book contains one of Clancy's most assured comic performances, 'How I Nearly Got to Meet Norman Mailer.' Homage in imitation is there from the third person point of view of the opening line: 'the first time the writer nearly got to meet Norman Mailer was at a meeting of the School of Continuing Education down on 11th Street.' Misadventures, and the approximations of personal exchanges follow. In his use of overseas settings, principally American, Clancy is sparing of detail. The drama is the thing, not the local colour, nor is there any sense that time spent abroad (by the author) is merely being milked for fiction. It is not the case that Clancy is happiest at home, although the next story in 'Literary Life' is as parochial as can be.

The setting of Clancy's comic masterpiece, 'The Annual Literary Test Match,' is an inner suburban cricket ground where takes place the yearly cricket match between the two rival literary journals, the *Moomba Review* and the *Sliprail Quarterly* (versions of the actual *Meanjin* and *Overland*). Returning are Professor Manners and Terry Shaw, although at an earlier stage of their acquaintance than at the dinner party, because Terry has only just had his job interview for a place in the English department. While the melee sports (the various codes of football) defy the most earnest exertions of

those who try to describe them, Australian literature can boast of writing of high quality, both fiction and journalism, about cricket and horse-racing. Recently, Test cricket was the background to Malcolm Knox's novel, *A Solitary Man* (2004), while long-distance swimming featured in his *Jamaica* (2007) and surfing in *The Life* (2011). In the shorter form, no one has surpassed Clancy's account of cricket, played at a social level, by men of widely disparate skills and an intensity that often cannot match them.

Thus 'Out on the ground, annual cricketers were blooming like new chrysanthemums, wielding bats and balls with varying degrees of proficiency or recall.' There in particular is Ted Potter, in purple Bermuda shorts and dirty runners, 'the most gifted and tender lyricist of his generation,' while around him 'the field echoed with the click of arthritic knees.' Tom Bell, American poet and writer in residence at Blamey University, hits a six and sets off because he thinks he has scored a home run. Disabused, he replies "'You mean I get to go up and face that fucker again ... until he strikes me out? Jesus! Hank Aaron should have known this game".' Terry is literally in at the kill. Having seen off the fast bowling of 'Stollard, the tall, dark-haired, glowering structuralist from Batman [University],' he brings this merry, bibulous occasion to a close around which legends will grow.

The assessment of Clancy's short fiction that Freadman's selection allows suggests, at first paradoxically, that his achievement may best be defined by what he is not. Clancy is no moralist of the sort that the fastidious Leavis could approve, although an actual meeting of the pair might be the stuff of someone else's comic fiction. Nor is he a simple realist, a dissector of middle-class mores, and in particular sexual transgressions. His work is more experimental and self-aware. In fact, less flamboyantly than Moorhouse or Wilding, Clancy was also seeking out new ways in fiction in which to describe the professional and personal worlds that intimately he knew. His Catholic past was neither angrily rejected, nor ignored. Instead it features in a number of stories as one of many shaping forces, if never the cardinal one. The argument against reductively regarding Clancy as a satirist has already been advanced. Nor is he an unreconstructed chauvinist from an era that had been thought relegated to the past. Freadman argues that 'Laurie's world tends to reflect a distinctively Australian notion of decency as a predominantly male, egalitarian and self-effacing virtue ... but the libidinal male ego in his stories is often regressed, narcissistic and amoral.'

Well said, save that the stories often show how these two impulses exist to his trouble within one man. This is exemplified in the story of his with the most resonant title. The eponymous hero of 'The Wife Specialist' is cynical but self-lacerating, and is far from boastful. As he introduces himself, at a dinner party, 'I am 35. I am exactly six feet tall and weigh 172 pounds. I have relaxed the marital tension of all six of my friends [at the table].' His improbable occupation and identity is, at least for the moment, secure: 'I'm a wife specialist,' he declares, as if this were just another of the healing practices imbued with its own ethical code (no unmarried women thank you). What we can see here is that Laurie Clancy—among a good deal else—was one of the finest comic talents to write short fiction in Australia. Freadman's welcome and judicious new selection might, in a better world, lead to a wholesale revaluation (a term favoured by Leavis) of the art and ambiguities of the stories of Laurie Clancy.

WORKS CITED

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