

Introduction

RICHARD FREADMAN

La Trobe University, Melbourne

&

JOHN McLAREN

Victoria University, Melbourne

Although the premature death of Laurie Clancy (1942-2010), novelist and short story writer, critic, editor and teacher, deprived us of an unknowable amount of imaginative and critical work, he left a body of writing that both in range and depth constitutes a major contribution to Australian literature. It is possibly the diversity of this work that has stood in the way of substantial analysis of any part of his legacy. This collection of memoirs and critical essays is an attempt to begin this discussion, and to place it in the context of a life that extended back to his Catholic upbringing and his students embroilments with left-wing politics and treachery, through to his editing and his maturity as a colleague, teacher and writer.

The collection is divided between memoirs and criticism, but as all contributors knew Clancy personally, most of their essays have elements of both recollection and appraisal. As a consequence, they jointly construct a portrait of the man of passion, wit and intellect whose laconic, often melancholic, personality looms behind the comedy, farce, and empathy of his fiction and the range and insight of his criticism. He was a nationalist who scorned chauvinism, a satirist who shared the humanity of his objects, and a teacher whose assessments were as sharp as his encouragements were warm. As both player and spectator, he followed sport with serious passion. He enjoyed the conversation of his friends and the pleasures of wine, and was a loving family man. Yet as a younger man he had known the potentially corrosive effects of desire, which constitute a major theme in his writing. The capacity of many of his male protagonists to love faithfully is complicated by emotional factors that have deep roots in the Catholicism he had long abandoned.

The collection opens with Susan Ballyn's recollections of Clancy from the perspective of the University of Barcelona. She knew Laurie first when he visited Spain, and then when she visited from Spain, and so in many ways he represented Australia to her. Memoirs by Brian Matthews and John Timlin recall his student days, with Timlin recovering the story of his glorious but ill-fated venture into editing and publishing. Tim Curnow, Laurie's literary agent for many years, gives a fresh perspective on him as a professional writer. Then Richard Freadman (one of the editors) recalls Clancy as a colleague at La Trobe University and as writer and critic. Clancy's academic career corresponded with the change in the nature of universities from centres of learning to instruments of economic and social change. Clancy was one of several academics who gave La Trobe University an enviable reputation as a home for public intellectuals—alas an endangered species in today's bureaucratized and highly specialised universities.

John Barnes combines his recollections of Laurie as a colleague with a study of his vast body of critical writing, including his book reviews and the lucid notes he prepared for many years for Council of Adult Education book reading groups. In an examination of Clancy's study of Vladimir Nabokov's fiction, Stephen Knight draws attention to an aspect of Clancy's work that could easily be overlooked. As his book notes show, he had a wide knowledge of global,

particularly American, fiction. His study of Nabokov refracts his own concerns through his nuanced critical account of Nabokov as man and artist—‘the last and lost romantic, brilliant, elusive, creative, modest to the point of self-concealing, and richly generous of his wide-ranging abilities.’ As Knight remarks, ‘that isn’t a bad account of Laurie Clancy himself.’

In her examination of Clancy’s studies of Christina Stead, Ann Blake demonstrates his skill as a critic as well as the importance of these studies to an understanding of the achievement of Stead as a novelist who showed the lives of her characters without judging them. The other editor, John McLaren, contributes a study of Clancy’s four novels, and Hermina Burns examines in detail what both writers consider the most important of them, *Perfect Love*. She shows how, despite the ventures of the novel into episodes of satire or comedy, the narrative achieves ‘a vision that is driven by love but finally tragic in nature.’ The final essay, by Peter Pierce, is the first critical work that, thanks to Richard Freadman’s capacious selection of Clancy’s stories, is able to look at a body of short stories that is likely to be seen as the greatest of his many contributions to Australian and world literature.

To round off this collection of essays, a number of writers contribute their recollections of Laurie as a teacher, a profession to which he dedicated himself as intensely as he did to his writing.