

NORMAN TALBOT: IN MEMORIAM

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Norman Talbot was born in Gislingham, rural Suffolk, in 1936, and was the first person from his village to attend a grammar school and go on to university. At the University of Durham, in 1956, he met his wife, Jean; they married in 1960, in Lincoln, while Norman was completing a thesis on the English reception of American literature at the University of Leeds. At Leeds, his interest in Australian literature was awakened by Geoffrey Dutton and Randolph Stow, and Norman also became a Quaker. Being one of the Society of Friends accorded with his pacifism — two older brothers had died in World War II — and influenced him to join Amnesty. Norman emigrated with Jean to take up a lectureship at the then University College in Newcastle, shortly to become the University of Newcastle. On arrival in 1963, they discovered that Newcastle had no Quaker congregation and helped found the small Newcastle Meeting, one of many initiatives they were to bring to the Hunter Valley. In the thirty years of his academic career, Norman rose to professorial rank, though, of the thousands of students who remember his teaching, many encountered him outside university. He retired in 1993, and began a decade as a full-time writer, during which he also acted as a literary consultant. After the GST rendered his Nimrod Press uneconomical, he was active in the foundation of two further Hunter Valley presses, Catchfire and Koel Koel. He passed away on 8 January 2004.

For all this, a remark on the cover note of Norman's first volume of verse, "I'm not nearly as interesting as my poems," is worth heeding. Where Australian literature is concerned, it is for his eleven books of poetry that Norman Talbot will be remembered, and, there being no entry for four of his published books in the AUSLIT database, it is worth listing the poems in

particular. The trajectory of Norman's career begins with the trilogy, *Poems for a Female Universe* (1968), *Son of a Female Universe* (1971) and *Find the Lady: A Female Universe Rides Again* (1977). The first of these, in which Norman draws on English folksong tradition and the imagery of his new homeland to produce poems like "The Cactus" and "Ballad of Old Women", is the strongest and most diverse of the three. It is difficult to prefer the poems of occluded guilt, and the attempts to integrate a Beat idiom, in the second volume, though "Dreamtrees", "Quaker Meeting" and "Asked for a Poem of 50 Words" have both power and directness. *Find the Lady* concludes with a Burnsian invocation to the Muse, and has some subtle and playful portraits en route, "Q-Q4ch." and "The Husband and the Lorelei" among them. Illustrated by John Montefiore, *The Fishing Boy* (1973) is a parable that doesn't quite do enough with its Coleridgian premises. *Where Two Rivers Meet* (1980) consists of fifty-two haiku and a resourceful essay on the adaptation of the Japanese form into English. The fruit of writing camps held outside Walgett for schools in north-western NSW, the haiku permitted a fresh engagement with the vernacular, as in the "hangover stories": "His face seraphic:/ 'Jesus, that was a bad night!'/ We all lean forward". Norman's handling of German legend and Japanese verse forms are indices of his pacifism, a bid to understand rather than appropriate the culture of former adversaries.

In *The Kelly Haiku and Other Widdershin Tracks* (1985), dramatic role-play and a more sinewy syntax combine to produce the light comedy of "Help!", the cold Gothic of "Trapper of Weasels" and the high-tensile alloy of folklore and narratology in "Quest". *The Birds of Britain Series*, with its dialectal parliament of bird-voices, was published as an independent sequence in 1989, before being incorporated in the *Four Zoas of Australia* (1992). This latter volume, since it includes both the early pamphlet *The Seafolding of Harri Jones* (1965) and a new conclusion

to the Tristan and Iseult sequence begun in *Poems for a Female Universe*, takes on a retrospective quality. A fine sequence based on *Madama Butterfly* allows Puccini's lovers to sing each other in haiku, before Pinkerton descends to Kiplingesque militarism. Cho-Cho-San's grief is briefer in utterance and lingers longer in the mind: "He says he will write./ Will he send me the silence/ we once lay inside?" The prefatory and concluding poems of the *Four Zoas*, that weigh the benefits for age of a contemplative detachment and reject it in favour of the senses and passions, are among Norman's finest work. That Yeatsian choice is made in Christian terms in *Australian Quaker Christmases* (1993), where the Australian season is celebrated with odes of simple pleasure, like "Christmas with Ratatouille", or the intensity of a southerly buster ode, in "Christmas Storm: Hunter Valley".

The three volumes of Norman's retirement demonstrate not only an ongoing fertility but a capacity to concentrate on the technical needs of his range of styles. *Australian Skin, Suffolk Bones* (1997) mainly recaptures the Suffolk of Norman's boyhood, in "The Smithy" and "Running to Mum in Jenny's Plant", though there also comes the poignant admission that there is "Farther between my father's/ & my steps than was between/ Anglians, hardhand Vikings/ Peasants' Revolt". *The Book of Changes* (1999) is a sequence of spare cosmogonic and endogonic hymns to set alongside John Montefiore's Sulman Prize-winning sequence, *Life Series*. Including the Broadway Poetry Prize-winning sequence "New South Wales Sonnet-Forms" alongside his "Suffolk Sonnets" in *Every Sonnet Tells a Story* (2003) enabled Norman, in his last book, to balance the matters of England and of Australia, his dual sense of deracination and of heartland. A third sequence, "The Story-Teller's Convention", draws self-reflexive attention to the narratological guile and craftsmanship of the collection, but personal

favourites remain sonnets dealing with a world of things and values, like “Bat” and “Listening to Little Wobby: Poetry Class”.

Norman had a full academic career, his publications including a monograph on Keats and some twenty-five articles in learned journals and scholarly collections, and several introductions to new editions, notably of William Morris’s romances. As well as writing of Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin, he often reviewed lesser-known fantasy and SF authors. Perhaps the only disappointment of his retirement was not finding a publisher for his own fantasy prose fiction. As pedagogue, his practice travelled outside accustomed routes: he provided students with affordable anthologies, a dictionary of critical terms and a spelling manual. His sprightly and encyclopaedic James Backhouse Lecture, *Myths and Stories, Lies and Truth*, was published in 1999. As publisher, he took every opportunity through his Nimrod Press (Nimrod the “Mighty Hunter”) to foster a regional literature in the Hunter Valley, bringing out anthologies, selections of four or five poets, and one-author volumes. Yet, together with his own, his wife Jean’s poetry is the clearest voice he helped introduce to the region. As Ross Bennett and Donald Moore would admit, Norman gave stalwart support to the production of their regional anthologies, *This Place* (1980) and *Visions from the Valley* (2000). It was fitting that his sequence, *Songcycle of the Birds* (1998) was the first Seamark pamphlet to emerge from the Catchfire Press. In the seventies and eighties, he was an indefatigable organiser of poetry camps, both for school-age and older writers. While poems of his own were inspired by these occasions, those who attended and taught at the various camps (Roland Robinson, Tom Naisby, Ross Bennett, Dorothy Hewett, Peter Kocan and Jean among them), in Morpeth, Bandon Grove and Little Wobby, Richmond, Tiona Park and Smiths Lake, will testify that Norman’s inventiveness and exuberance were an inspiration. Many found means to express the poems Norman, more than they, believed they had

in them. Throughout the nineties he was a staunch supporter of Newcastle's Poetry at the Pub, his work frequently appearing in the group's annual anthologies.

While Norman should be remembered for his poetry, it is clear that the frequency and quality of his reception declined after the seventies. In part, this may be because his energies were devoted to regional literature; in part, it may be because he persisted with neo-Romantic convictions through decades when these became unfashionable. Though his Romantic idealism owed something initially to Dylan Thomas and Harri Jones, it quickly freed him to write his most distinctive work. Poems like "The Wrath of Tibrogargan", that fashion a sense of emerging identity out of personal loss and the discovery of the Australian continent, deserve to be more widely known. A reevaluation of Norman Talbot's neglected oeuvre, and a *Selected Poems* that will be the vehicle for such a reevaluation, are overdue.

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