

Remembering Laurie Clancy

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1990—the exchange agreement between La Trobe University and Barcelona University had just been signed. I, as Co-ordinator on the Barcelona side, was on my first visit to La Trobe. At the time I knew only four people John Barnes and Lucy Frost from English, Robert Archer and Lilit Thwaites from Spanish. As part of my visit, a drinks party was held for me by the English Department and people from other areas of the University also attended. I was somewhat bemused at the attention I was getting as part of this strange but exciting set up in Barcelona where Australian Studies was being taught. I was constantly asked not only at La Trobe but anywhere I went in Australia: ‘Australian Studies in Barcelona. Why?’ The answer was always one that surprised. Prof. Doireann MacDermott had introduced what was then called Commonwealth Studies onto the Syllabus in Barcelona in the late sixties and early seventies. Indeed, Barcelona University was the first University outside the United Kingdom to have such studies on offer to its undergraduates.

There were a lot of people there to meet me, or so it felt at the time, but standing taller than the others was Laurie Clancy to whom I was eventually introduced by John Barnes. I was well aware that this welcome party was very much part of what was hoped would become a good exchange between the two institutions and, I have to say, I was somewhat worried about exactly what I as coordinator at the Barcelona end had taken on. Was I going to be able to deal with the administration and all that this involved and pull the Australian Studies through to a further stage in its existence? All of this was jumbling around my head as I met more and more people. Laurie put a hand on my shoulder and said ‘You can expect a La Trobe invasion!’ I must have looked slightly startled as he chortled ‘Well, Barcelona dear; come on!’ Over the years we did have a stream of visitors from La Trobe and the agreement has proved to be successful with both students and staff.

Laurie struck me then as a great raconteur and as somebody with a fast quick wit which, as I came to know, often left me standing as I tried to grab the crack before replying. Over time, I met Laurie and Neelam his partner and they were extremely generous to me as hosts and taking me out for luscious meals. I remember a memorable day spent with Neelam when she took me out to Ballarat for the day, which ended with a wonderful meal at a restaurant with a large open fire. Both Neelam and Laurie became loyal friends over the years to come.

Laurie came to visit us at Barcelona University: twice as a lecturer and once for the EASA (the European Association for Studies of Australia) Conference we held in Sitges. He first came to teach in the English Department at Barcelona University in 1992. His visits as a lecturer were always marked by the quality of his lectures, the great mix of authority but relaxation with which he taught. It was not unusual to walk past a session Laurie was in and hear gales of laughter wafting out; on other occasions a stillness of concentration and discussion seemed to emanate from the open classroom door.

At the time when Laurie came out to Barcelona the Australian Studies Centre did not exist as such but was running as an Australian Studies Program where we had visiting lecturers for short periods of time. He had been assigned an obligatory PhD course on Australian Literature. The

group was therefore small and with students who were articulate and who had already done basic groundwork in Australian studies in their undergraduate years if they were from our own institution. If they came from other universities where Commonwealth Literature, as it was still called, was not taught, then they had a lot of ground to cover and Laurie would dedicate extra time to these students so that they would feel comfortable in class and be at the same level as their peers. I remember one day in particular when I walked into my favourite café and sitting there at a table littered with texts and notebooks was Laurie with three students. They were in such deep conversation that none of them noticed me as I walked past and I was able to observe how Laurie was in fact priming them on texts they were having difficulty with.

As we all share offices in the department, when not desks, it is sometimes easier for extra office hours, as we call them, to be given at a nearby café. Certainly most of our Australian visiting lecturers have frequently used this method and the students have often felt it to be most congenial.

Of course Laurie, with his sense of humour, skills as a lecturer and as a writer took part in our department events and office discussions. During his first visit, I was teaching Renaissance poetry alongside my colleague and friend Bill Phillips. Indeed, we shared an office with two other colleagues, so Laurie was able to use either my desk or Bill's depending on which was vacant, although Bill's desk was usually far more 'habitable' than mine. After class one day, when we had been teaching Thomas Wyatt, a discussion broke out amongst the three of us. One of the poems I loved taking apart in class was Thomas Wyatt's 'They flee from me that Sometime did me Seek.' I usually unpacked it from a feminist position and then asked the class to bring forward their own suggestions and readings. I know that then the first stanza always played on me intensely with its condescending manner, which I would analyse with a counterattack on Wyatt. Inevitably Laurie, Bill and I got engaged in a discussion on the poem and Laurie said he thought it was one of the most beautiful love poems ever written. I remembered my amazement at his interpretation. He then took the text and read it out to us in a most powerful and nuanced way. I was not convinced, Bill took a more thoughtful position. It was years later that Bill came into the Australian Studies Centre, after teaching the same poem again, and observed: 'You know, I think Laurie was absolutely right in his reading of that Wyatt poem.' I finally came round to sharing their view. In time I realised I had actually failed to see exactly what Laurie had meant. He had seen much further than I had as a reader/teacher so I used to teach it the same way and push the students to reverse my reading and eventually end up with Laurie's.

Having Laurie in Barcelona was always eventful, so much so that he often left me and others spaced out in disbelief. When we held the EASA Conference *Australia's Changing Landscapes* in 1993 he came out just for the four days of the conference, enough to make anyone feel tired. Laurie however was not, or if he was he never showed it. That was a conference which sticks in my mind as an organiser for a number of disastrous reasons. All of the bits which fell off the edges of the conference went unnoticed to the delegates, but not to the organisers. We held the conference in a lovely hotel in the beautiful town of Sitges just south of Barcelona.

On the evening of the first day, there was a reception and the official opening of an art exhibition which accompanied the conference. Just before it was all about to start a student volunteer came to me with two bits of dire news. 'Was there' she asked carefully 'any reason why the artist's signature seemed to appear upside down in the top right hand corner of the paintings?' The always helpful staff at the hotel had offered to hang the exhibition for us. I can only presume that the abstract nature of the paintings threw them into disarray. Then came the next bit. The

student also informed me that none of the wine, which the Australian Ambassador had brought in his car from Madrid, was visible for the reception. It had been carefully laid away in the wine cellar until ready for use. With a few minutes to go, I grabbed the only person who I thought could possibly help me with discretion and efficiency, Laurie, and asked him to keep the Ambassador and the then president of EASA totally engaged in conversation long enough for us to sort it all out. He did a wonderful job and we were ready to go in ten minutes which I don't think anybody else noticed.

On another occasion, I got back to the hotel after sorting out another problem area, in time to witness Laurie walking away from the hotel bar with drinks for a group sitting in the lounge. As he did so, the bar ceiling came down! I could not believe that this was actually happening and, after ensuring the staff behind the bar were fine, Laurie, who knew what was going pear shaped, offered me a brandy. I badly needed it!

As if this was not enough, the weather in Sitges was beautiful with a full autumn sun. Some delegates took to the beach and on a couple of occasions forgot they were chairing a session or giving a paper! None of the organising committee was prepared for such a contingency! Laurie, always a keen observer, would look at me, wink, and on most occasions shot across the road to rescue the truants from the warm sand. Never good at moving fast, I am eternally grateful for Laurie's speed in getting people back, a speed no doubt due to his ability as a cricketer, but also his intention to save the conference from certain disaster! Throughout that conference he was always there at the right moment in a kind of miraculous way.

In 1995, Laurie was back again to teach at the university, with Neelam accompanying him. This time we were in the good position of being able to pay him. The university however, could only pay in cash. Unhappy about this—given the usual pickpocketing that goes on in any city but which was rife in the Ramblas where they were staying—I told him to watch out and go straight back to the hotel and safeguard the money. Laurie left the office to join Neelam to go back to where they were staying but when I got back from a class Bill told me he was in our office, completely shaken because his pocket had been done on the way down the Ramblas. He was pale and distraught, angry that he had not seen the pickpockets coming. There was not much we could do except go to the police station and file a report. Laurie's description of how it all happened was hilarious in retrospect but not at the time. While walking down the Ramblas two women selling roses came up and pestered him to buy one for Neelam. As they tried to get away from the women Laurie's wallet vanished. Once all the paperwork was done I went back to the faculty and handed over copies of the police report for insurance purposes.

I can not remember how many days later, but one morning at some very early hour the telephone rang and I heard Laurie say 'Sue, can you come to the police station? I need a translator.' I had to get him to repeat it as I thought this was some kind of nightmare. He explained that he and Neelam had got the pickpockets and they were to arrive at the central police station in a police van in a short while. That was all I knew as I shot out of the front door, leaving my husband wondering what on earth was going on. 'Laurie's got the pickpockets and I am off to the police station' was, I realised afterwards, not exactly a coherent explanation.

I had to wait some time, but when the van arrived the scene was like something out of a Jacques Tati movie. I watched Laurie unravel himself from the front seat while the policeman opened the back of the van and three ragingly furious foulmouthed women emerged in handcuffs. I could only stare. How had this happened I wondered. We all piled in through the front door and, once the earshattering abuse had faded away, were taken in to an office where Laurie was

to sign his statement, but first of all I had to translate for him. I could not believe my ears as the story gradually unfolded.

Laurie and Neelam had been for an early stroll down the Ramblas when the same women who had stolen Laurie's wallet came up and tried the same ruse. There was instant recognition on all parts. Serendipitously, a police car was just alongside the kerb and Neelam ran for help while Laurie carried out what I can only assume was a citizen's arrest. He didn't go into great detail about how he managed to immobilise the women in the seconds before the police ran across, but having a vivid imagination I grinned to myself at the possible scene. The pickpockets had never expected to find the same tourists again as most pass through the city on a stay of four days or less. Laurie told the story with much humour and in the end both of us and the police officer ended up in fits of laughter. Needless to say it made a very good story both in the department and elsewhere.

Laurie's fiction is well known to many around the world and I admired his ability to hone the short story down to its bare essentials in prose which could move from the caustic, ironic, to the intensely humorous. While I enjoyed reading Laurie's stories, and I will never forget the gales of laughter that echoed through our office as Bill and I read *The Wildlife Reserve* (1994), it was from his work as a reviewer and critic that I learnt so much. His reviews were always well balanced, fair, and if he had to be fierce he would be. When I was writing my very first review, he happened to be with us in Barcelona and as I dodged out of the office for yet another coffee he muttered 'You seem a bit jittery.' I told him what I was doing. His advice was a golden gift which I have learnt to refine over years. 'Look you have to say what you really think. You must be honest with yourself as a critic, honest to the writer and the readers of both your review and the book.' He then gave me what I can only call a tutorial which has served me since then. On one occasion I told him how he had helped me. 'You mean you believed me?' he shot back.

I did not want to write about Laurie's work here as there are people far more qualified than I who will do that. I wanted to write about Laurie as I knew him. Writing now, I realise that I have not only written about his worth as an intellectual, wit and literary strength but also about his human qualities. Without intending to, it is memories, his sense of humour and spontaneity that have come to the fore and I have smiled as I have been writing.