Stuart Macintyre – A Note of Appreciation

Professor Stuart Macintyre passed away on 22 November 2021 after a determined but ultimately unsuccessful battle with cancer. He is mourned by many. His immediate and extended family — of whom he was immensely proud and spoke often — naturally grieve his loss more than anyone else. Beyond that lies a circle of his best friends and close academic collaborators, people with whom Stuart worked closely on topics as diverse as communism in Australia, the history of Melbourne University, working-class politics, the History Wars, and so much more.

But beyond that inner ring of personal and academic intimates is a further — and larger — circle of people who have been saddened and struck by Stuart’s passing. There are those who worked with him in Heritage Victoria, on education curricula, in the learned academies, and in a range of leadership roles within and beyond the University of Melbourne. And there are his students, undergraduate and postgraduate, long past and recent, with whom he maintained contact. I am one of them, and it is from that position — somewhere in the grey zone between the intimacy of a close friend and the formality of a mere colleague — that I write. There are a lot of us. I hope my words speak for many besides myself.

I first met Stuart in 1995 when undertaking my doctoral studies. In the days before email, I had corresponded with him from New Zealand about the possibilities of PhD study at Melbourne, and he became my associate supervisor. We soon bonded over a shared love of sport (particularly running) and remained in regular contact for the next twenty-five years. Befitting the type of friendship we had, we rarely if ever went to each other’s houses, and beyond delighting (usually) in the changing fortunes of our immediate and extended families, personal matters were generally beyond our realm. But we nonetheless got to know each other well, shared many a story, plenty of laughs, an occasional meal or drink, and a considerable amount of coffee (always a flat white for him, a double-shot latte for me). Perhaps my experience of Stuart was slightly atypical. Our shared interest in running gave us an extra point of connection, and our association was a lengthy one at over twenty-five years. But I know from talking with others in similar relation to him that the broad outlines of our experiences of Stuart are remarkably alike.

He was, first and foremost, one hell of an historian. Others are far better placed to comment on his vast and wide scholarship. For me it will suffice to say that I rarely read anything of his without feeling deeply drawn into the topic, even if it had previously held little interest. Only after reading Stuart did I understand the history of the Communist Party of Australia, the implementation of the Dawkins reforms or post-Second World War Reconstruction as topics of both fascination and importance.

All his life, Stuart genuinely loved history, capitalised and not. It showed in the way he continued to write — prolifically — after retirement, even in declining health. He gave selflessly to his profession in a great variety of roles. He had a vast array of historical knowledge and wisdom, and forever sought more. And he shared it generously in his writing, in talks, and in conversation. I understand that Peter Nicholson, former cartoonist for The Australian, once described his regular Sunday
runs with Stuart as a history tutorial with exercise. Having learned much about the Melbourne’s inner west while running up the Maribyrnong with him, about the history of Scotland, Stirling Castle and rabbits (!) while struggling to stay with him on a jog through the University of Stirling, and about Canberra’s origins and development while puffing around Lake Burley Griffin, I can only marvel at how much must have been absorbed by his regular Sunday morning running companions. “Macapedia”, some of his students used to call him. Most long-distance runners run largely in silence, even in company. We call it “making oxygen choices”. Stuart, typically, regarded that as a missed opportunity, as not making the most of the available time and company. Why not run and talk? It was the same mentality that led him to once install a microfilm reader in his kitchen during one of Martha’s fieldwork absences, so that he could cook for his daughters and read at the same time. And perhaps it was the same mentality that lay behind his notoriously quick walking and aggressive driving — transit time was wasted time. His enthusiasm was infectious.

I loved, and still love his prose. Much like the man himself, Stuart’s writing was typically lean, precise, and to the point, but he did permit himself the occasional indulgence. The “acquisitive itch the market”, history as an “irritant rubbing away at the national conscience”. The opening pages to his Concise History of Australia, in which he contemplates the competing origin stories of the Dreamtime and “settlement”, are positively poetic. The traditional European history was “a story of a sleeping land brought to life by purposeful endeavour [...]. The sound of an axe on wood, English steel on antipodean eucalypt, broke the silence of a primeval wilderness”. But this version was superseded and “a history of colonisation yielded to a realisation of invasion” as Australia discovered a human history stretching back sixty thousand years rather than a couple of hundred. Re-reading it now (“Always check your quotes, Martin”), I wonder if the particular lyricism of this chapter was deliberate — a “singing” of the past to mirror Indigenous song? Or maybe it was more that he just liked a bit of elegance. He was, after all, a snappy dresser, at work at least.

Although he was not my primary PhD supervisor, and despite the many other calls on his time, I found Stuart to be remarkably engaged and interested in my own work and development as an historian. Like many, I initially struggled with this. Why would he be interested in my research/writing/ideas/career? Why was he singling me out? Was he just being polite? He wasn’t of course — he followed all his proteges closely, revelled in their successes, and offered solace or advice in tougher times. One of the keys to a good relationship with Stuart, to overcoming “imposter syndrome”, was to accept that you weren’t in his league as an historian — and to accept that it didn’t matter.

His generosity has — quite rightly — been one of the key themes in his tributes, obituaries, and eulogies. It took many forms. His students and former students all benefited from his attentive comments on draft chapters, articles, and books. His handwriting was spidery and at times difficult to make out (one of the few subjects I ever witnessed him show any sensitivity about) but the comments were always insightful and helpful. He wanted us not just to write good history, but to write it well. Most of his former students can readily recall his imprecations. He disliked sub-headings (“They’re substitutes — not aids — for good organisation and flow”) and he was disdainful of passive language, flashy jargon, and wasted words. If we transgressed, or submitted other forms of mangled or tortuous prose, the draft would come back with “Ugh!” in the margin. For many of us, he is still our imaginary reader.

He regularly frequented second-hand bookshops and book fairs, and often purchased books he thought his students would be interested in — and always refused repayment. I still have the copy of David Newsome’s Godliness and Good Learning: Four Studies
on a Victorian Ideal which he thoughtfully picked up for me in 1995. If it had a price sticker when he bought it, it was removed by the time he gave it to me. He answered emails promptly, offered advice when it was sought, and was warm in his congratulations for academic and non-academic achievements. I once half-jokingly suggested we put a bottle of wine on who could beat the other in the 1998 Melbourne Marathon — half-jokingly as I was a very fit 29-year-old and he an extremely busy History Professor in his fifties. Despite the hollowness of a narrow victory (less than two minutes — Stuart was an impressive and deceptively fast runner), a rather nice bottle of red appeared over my shoulder as I sat in the History Department’s Margaret Kiddle tea-room a couple of days later. I think I managed to pay for one coffee and one beer in all the time I knew him, and rarely paid for my own lunch. Reaching for one’s wallet in his beloved University House was polite, but something of a charade.

And he was funny. He was too classy for base humour, but he found the pretentious amusing, the self-serving risible, and had a keen eye for the ludicrous — high-brow slapstick. He was a good raconteur and had an endearing chuckle. He learned and told tales about people and places on scales small and large. A wander to or from University House might involve his thoughts on a good piece of History he’d recently read, the inefficiencies of Australian coal mines in the post-Second World War period, or the bastardry of a particular political figure, corporate grifter, or sporting cheat. The stories he discovered and shared, whether in learned writing or casual conversations, explained and enriched the world for both himself and his many and varied audiences.

In a scurrilous and ill-informed editorial at the height of the History Wars, The Australian once described Stuart as the Godfather of Australian History. It alleged that he kept everyone in line like a mafia boss, and ensured that friends were well looked after and enemies punished through controlling who was awarded Australian Research Council funds. It was such nonsense that it became something of a joke among those who knew Stuart to be a man of unimpeachable integrity. But in another sense, he was a Godfather. Maybe those of us who were away from our home countries or who had lost fathers to early deaths felt it more keenly, but along with many others Stuart gave us reassurance, guidance, and support. His benevolent paternalism was unintrusive and restrained, but none the less real for that.

I miss Stuart. He wasn’t supposed to go. Some things should be constant, and it jars and unsettles to have to accept that they are not. But sorrow at his passing must be leavened with gratitude for his legacy. Australian history, the historical profession, and so many of its practitioners and students are much the better for having had him for so long as we did.

Vale Stuart, and thank you.

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