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Radical ruminations (09 August)

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Abstract

News of a forthcoming 'Denis Kevans Memorial Concert Fundraiser for Chemical Warfare Victims of the Vietnam War' (Sydney, 23 August 2015) brought back memories, and because Denis was never far away from both the making and study of history, a few notes seem appropriate... Denis Kevans (1939-2005) was a songwriter, folk singer, public servant, labourer on building sites, trade unionist, teacher, journalist, but mostly he was a poet. We met in 1965, and I published a couple of his now classic anti-war poems in the Sydney University student newspaper honi soit. Our association continued thereafter until his death from complications arising from heart surgery.

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DENIS KEVANS: POET

by Rowan Cahill

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News of a forthcoming 'Denis Kevans Memorial Concert Fundraiser for Chemical Warfare Victims of the Vietnam War' (Sydney, 23 August 2015) brought back memories, and because Denis was never far away from both the making and study of history, a few notes seem appropriate.....

Denis Kevans (1939-2005) was a songwriter, folk singer, public servant, labourer on building sites, trade unionist, teacher, journalist, but mostly he was a poet. We met in 1965, and I published a couple of his now classic anti-war poems in the Sydney University student newspaper *honi soit*. Our association continued thereafter until his death from complications arising from heart surgery.

I have before me the file of correspondence resulting from this association, capturing the 'driveness' and creativity and always-on-the-go nature of Kevans' creativity, a hectic collection of notes scribbled on scraps of paper, photocopies sent of his latest works, hurriedly typed missives with hand-corrections announcing his latest anthology (*The Great Prawn War and Other Poems*, 1982; *Ah, White man, have you any sacred sites?*, 1985; *The Bastard Who Squashed the Grapes in Me Bag*, 1991), along with requests for me to review it/them. Self-published, his anthologies were in part financed from royalties resulting from the use by the iconic band 'Midnight Oil' of one of his poems. In 1976 Denis and I planned to publish an anthology of his poems in time for Christmas sales, but we could not get the necessary cash together.

Denis does not appear in the Australian literary canon, except for passing mention, and he is not one of those poets who make it regularly into Australian anthologies. Yet he and his work have had greater exposure to people, and more people have possibly engaged with his work and been moved by it, than can be said for many other Australian poets. His verse has been recorded by at least 100 musicians, been translated in six languages, and anthologised in Vietnam, Russia, and in South America. His first volume of poetry, *The Great Prawn War* (1982), sold at least 2000 copies. Not bad for a book of poems in Australia where print runs are notoriously small.

Mostly Denis published in Australian social movement publications, his poetry, much of it satirical and humorous, championing trade union, social justice, anti-war, and environmental causes and issues. He performed his work too, and had a speaking/public voice and knew how to work an audience. For example, at the Palm Sunday anti-nuclear rally in Sydney, 1984, he held an audience of 150, 000 people.

For Denis, poetry was meant to be read, heard, and understood. He was not about writing for 'quiet contemplation', or about writing clever stuff for fellow poets, or writing to demonstrate artistry and/or technique. Which is not to say he was not schooled in the

classics, nor that he was unaware of poetic techniques. Indeed he came out of the Catholic school system, and had been a boarder at the prestigious St Joseph's College, Hunters Hill, Sydney, before briefly enrolling in Medicine at Sydney University.

But Medicine was not to be his way, and he became instead a public servant, then a labourer, before completing a part-time Arts degree at Sydney University, getting a teaching qualification, and thereafter variously making a living via teaching and journalism. In 1979 Denis successfully completed an MA in English Literature at Sydney University. His thesis subject was the World War 1 Australian anti-war soldier poet Henry Weston Pryce (1891-1963).

Largely unknown and forgotten until Kevans championed him, Pryce, according to Kevans, is a significant war poet, dealing with extensive personal experience of frontline soldiering and war, producing “the best poetry we have expressing the thinking Australian soldier’s point of view”.

Kevan's poetry first took to the streets, so to speak, during the anti-nuclear campaigns of the early 1960s, the Vietnam War later that decade bringing him to prominence. His work is the subject of a paper given by Jefferson Lee at the February 2015 National Australian Labour History Conference in Melbourne.

NOTE:

For obituaries of Kevans see Jefferson Lee, “Witty voice of a humane generation”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17-18 September 2005, p. 78; Bob Fagan, “Denis Kevans (1939-2005)”, *Labour History*, Issue 89 (November 2005), pp. 239-242. My reviews of *The Great Prawn War & other poems* is in *Education*, Journal of the NSW Teachers Federation, 14 March 1983, p. 21; *Ah, White man, have you any sacred sites?*, *Education*, 2 June 1986, p. 194; *The Bastard Who Squashed the Grapes in Me Bag* is in *OzMuze*, Vol. 1, No. 13, October 1991, and was republished in *Education*, 29 January, 1992, p. 16. A hand-corrected and annotated first draft typescript of Kevans’ thesis dated 1976, titled *The poetry of Henry Weston Pryce as an expression of historical experience, and the literary influences on his work*, is in the library of the Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra. A surviving final copy has not been located at the time of writing. Jefferson Lee’s paper about Kevans was titled “From Gallipoli to Iraq-the Anti-War Peace Poems of the Late Denis Kevans (1939-2005)”.

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9 August 2015.