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Anne Collett

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### **Abstract**

These beautiful words from John Shaw Neilson's poem 'At the Dancer's Grave' speak for how I feel, but also stand as symbol of my association with Val Vallis, the university lecturer who introduced me to Australian poet, John Shaw Neilson, to the English Romantic poets, and with whom I shared a love of Judith Wright's poetry.

ANNE COLLETT

## In Memoriam: Valentine Vallis [1916–2009]

This is no place for stately sorrowing  
But for the simple amens and the flowers  
And the full hearts that come about the Spring.

These beautiful words from John Shaw Neilson's poem 'At the Dancer's Grave' speak for how I feel, but also stand as symbol of my association with Val Vallis, the university lecturer who introduced me to Australian poet, John Shaw Neilson, to the English Romantic poets, and with whom I shared a love of Judith Wright's poetry.

I began my undergraduate degree at the University of Queensland in 1976 under the shadow of disappointment that I didn't make it into Medicine and had thus enrolled in Science with the aim of applying for entry to Medicine at the end of my first year. I enrolled in Biology, Physics and Chemistry and, somewhat whimsically, English. After two weeks of complete incomprehension in the Organic Chemistry class (I couldn't understand a thing written on the board at lectures and managed to come up with a chemical formula not even listed as an option in the prac), I realised that although I loved Biology, I was not meant for the so called 'hard sciences' and the subject with which I felt most at ease and in which I found most enjoyment was that other 'soft' option, English literature (I prefer to think of the adjective 'soft' as applying to the heart rather than the head). So I made the drastic change to an Arts degree with an English major (and no prospect of employment, money or status) and in 2nd year, transferred to the honours stream and a double major in English (that possibly doubled my lack of prospect).

This was the point at which I came under the influence of Val: Romantics with Val in 2nd year and Yeats with Val in 4th year. Val was the most inspiring of teachers because his love of his subject was infectious, and because he gave so generously of his knowledge, energy, enthusiasm and time. I remember animated discussions of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, of Wordsworth's original and revised *Prelude*, and of Coleridge's distinction between Fancy and Imagination. It was Imagination, an idea central to Romantic philosophy, that inspired Val's teaching



and research and that became central to my own work, and still forms the focus of my teaching on Romanticism. If it were not for Val, I might not have ended up where I am today — not only teaching Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake and Byron to second year students at the University of Wollongong, but also pursuing the study of Australian poetry. Val supervised my Honours dissertation on aesthetics and the role of the image in poetry, in particular the poetry of John Shaw Neilson and Judith Wright; he also wrote the many references required for scholarships and entry to the Masters (at Queensland) and PhD (in London) and then for my first academic position at the University of Aarhus in Denmark.

The essay that follows grew out of my desire to do more ‘in memory’ of the man who had such a big impact on my decision to become an academic and who was for me a role model of what a teacher could and should be. The essay (part of a longer paper delivered in July 2009 at the Association for the Study of Australian Literature’s Conference on ‘Common Readers and Cultural Critics’, the Australian National University, Canberra) is a tribute to Val’s stalwart support of Australian poetry through times when those brought up on a diet of canonical English literature would ask ‘what Australian poetry?’

#### **AN UNCOMMON MAN WITH THE COMMON TOUCH**

I’m not really sure who the ‘Common Reader’ is or what it is that constitutes ‘commonness’, but given that those of us who are literate are all readers and writers, I would like to offer this paper as tribute to Val Vallis (who died in January 2009) and the uncommon contribution he made not only to the minds and hearts of the many students (common or otherwise) who came under the magic of his influence, but also to a collaborative project that resulted in the publication of *Witnesses of Spring*, a collection of John Shaw Neilson’s unpublished poems. One of the collaborators, Ruth Harrison, writes in a prefatory note to the volume, ‘I have been indebted to Dr Val Vallis of the University of Queensland. Without his recognition of the value of the manuscript material and his drive and enthusiasm in overcoming scepticism in some quarters, these poems may not have come to light at this time’ (xix). Val was a poet himself, publishing *Songs of the East Coast* in 1947, *Dark Wind Blowing* in 1961 and a new collection of poetry also titled *Songs of the East Coast* in 1997; and his work with Judith Wright on the Neilson volume is a declaration of the value he placed upon her poetic credentials as a reader and writer of uncommon sensitivity and skill. Val’s relationship with Judith however was ‘uneven’, perhaps more a matter of class than of gender.

Pat Buckridge alludes to the aloof patrician in Wright when he records in his recent work on Queensland literary cultures how she was ‘persuaded by Val Vallis and Ken Hamilton, head of the English Department at the university [of Queensland], to descend from the Mount (Tamborine) to offer her famous weekly series of poetry classes at the university in the mid-1960s’ (67); and in an interview conducted with Wright for *The Bulletin* (but unpublished with Douglas Stewart’s retirement from its editorship) Val asked Judith why she chose to live

in Tamborine rather than Brisbane — why country rather than city — to which she replied with ‘a smile’. Val reads that smile with the observation that, ‘Anyone who has fallen for the spell of that volcanic outcrop with its rainforests and redbrown fertile soil its Olympian air, needs no answer’. Interestingly, however, he moves on to deny the claim that ‘the Southern critic’ might be tempted to make for ‘the Tamborine farmhouse as a kind of Petit Trianon’ (a reference to the Chateau in the grounds of the Palace of Versailles to which Marie Antoinette famously retreated to escape the formality of court life and the burden of royal responsibility). Val tells the story of ‘making do with what is at hand and by hand’ required of Judith’s life in Queensland country, and remarks that it is ‘this “peasant” quality of a timeless identity with the earth that marks her work off from contemporary Australian writing’, equating Wright with Hardy and Synge — poets whose greatness grew from the soil. Val also records ‘a day in the life of Judith Wright’ that although designed to refute her positioning as aloof, seems less ‘peasant’ than domestic. That day:

ranges from the gentle turmoil of getting daughter Meredith off to school, the hour in the vegetable patch, looking after the calf or Meredith’s pony, the hens, a trip to the main shopping centre of Mt. Tamborine, with its bakehouse all oven and pastry bench, sewing and cooking, and the many extra tasks required by the street stalls for the local Junior Red Cross and the Parents’ and Citizens’ Committee for the local school ... It is often ‘latish’, as Barry Humphries would say, that Judith Wright is able to find time for the literary work that must bring in some part of the family income ... setting down the poetic ideas that may occur during the digging, or the washing-up. (F904 4)

Ultimately, I find Val’s equation of Wright’s poetry with peasantry unconvincing, perhaps because the alliance speaks more for her partner, Jack McKinney’s background and influence, than it does for Wright’s; or maybe it does come down to the difference gender makes. For all her gardening and washing-up, sewing and cooking, Wright is neither common labourer nor common woman. The joint McKinney libraries that ‘bulge from their appointed walls into the living room’ (3) suggest the uncommon reader — the reader of educated taste and discrimination — the poets Vaughan and Traherne are on her current reading list; and her record collection consists in the main of chamber music — ‘Mozart and Brandenburg concertos’ (although Val also mentions a lack of vocal music, the exception being the Irish ballad singer Delia Murphy and Barry Humphries ... something of the common touch here perhaps) (3). There is however no evidence of ‘the navvy’ here — a term used by John Shaw Neilson to refer to the hard labour of working on the roads. ‘In the autumn we were breaking stones on a Road job,’ recalls John Shaw Neilson. ‘Then I think Dad & I did a small contract for the shire, some draining and a culvert. In the winter we got a job of woodcutting which lasted close up till Xmas’ (1978 35).

In the first ‘letter’ of his autobiography, Shaw Neilson records a life of desperate poverty and hardship: ‘I think it is pretty common knowledge amongst the working class, during the last thirty years, that the Contract System is always

in favour of the Employer’: ‘That year,’ recalls Neilson, ‘we followed the trasher again, but only for five weeks. This year, I had a better job, I was on the wheat stack. The year before, I had been chaffy, and that accounted for the sore eyes’ (35). ‘The red dust was very bad that year and I got sore eyes, which stopped me from doing any reading or writing till the middle of Winter . . . I think the sore eyes was about the beginning of my very discontented period which lasted for several years. . . . When my eyes got better, I tried to write verse and Stories. I got eight lines of rhyme into the *Leader*’ (1978 33).

Although one of Val’s many talks on Neilson is titled ‘The poet who never went to school’, reading (and writing) is here not a matter so much of education or its lack, but material, and cannot help but remind me of the point made so well by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*, that:

Imaginative work. . . is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. . . . But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in. (53–54)

To be a ‘common reader’ (or an ‘uncommon reader’ depending on how you look at it) is perhaps to be a reader who finds him or herself in poverty of circumstance that proves disabling not only in terms of the lack of opportunity for leisure or guidance, but the lack of material object (books, paper, ink) and physical ability (poor eyesight attributable to or exacerbated by living conditions). In her foreword to the collection of ‘unpublished poems by John Shaw Neilson’, Wright (perhaps tellingly) makes no mention of the ‘day job’ that kept Neilson from his ‘real work’, but rather concentrates on a discussion of his poetic craft, and the difficulties encountered in editing from manuscripts sometimes indecipherable, often hastily written and unfinished due to ‘his own lack of leisure [that] would have prevented him from going over past Notebooks, and his poor eyesight’ (xiv). But in her introduction to Shaw Neilson’s *Autobiography*, Nancy Keesing is more explicit and more confrontational, remarking that, ‘John Shaw Neilson was a peasant poet in the direct line of Burns (whose poetry he learned as a boy), Clare, Crabbe and Rob Donn’, and that:

Like Rob Donn, but unlike the other three, Neilson worked arduously, and essentially as a peasant, for the great part of his life. The fact that Australia does not officially admit to a peasantry is beside the point. Little is altered by our preference for euphemisms like ‘cocky farmer’, replacing earlier terms like ‘stringybark settler’. Neilson uncompromisingly called himself a navvy, when a more pretentious man might have said ‘fruitpicker’, ‘scoop operator’ or ‘quarry hand’. Neilson and his father and brothers, straining their muscles, racking their joints and breaking their hearts at pioneering a series of doomed small farms, were unequivocally peasants. (12)

I think the esteem in which Val held Wright’s poetry (and person) was quite different to his feeling for Shaw Neilson. Val was drawn to the study of Neilson’s poetry, as much I would suggest for a fascination and a sympathetic alliance with

the man, as for an admiration and perhaps some envy of the poetry. Neilson, like Val, was an uncommon, common man: a man of more than usual complexity and contradiction. Pat Buckridge captures something of this in his brief portrait and placement of Val in the ‘literary history of Queensland’. He writes:

Vallis was born and grew up in [the small Queensland coastal country town of] Gladstone, the son of a local ‘wharfie’ and fisherman, [i.e. he was a commoner] and his first book of poems, *Songs of the East Coast* (1947), expressed a passionate attachment to the place and people ... his best, and best-known, poems ... are heartfelt tributes to his father, and to the magic of a vanishing way of life... Vallis’s later poetry has a more wistful and inward cast, somewhat shaped by the melancholy lyricism of Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold and Charlotte Mew, and by Shaw Neilson, whose poems he co-edited with Judith Wright in 1963. It insists, as they do, on the intrinsic beauty and human meaning of natural things. (1988 61)

But if Val’s poetic output was slim, Buckridge goes on to argue, ‘his importance for Brisbane’s postwar poetic culture was disproportionately great’:

This was because he both embodied and disseminated, through thirty years of teaching aesthetics and poetry at the University of Queensland, a powerful and distinctive conception of poetry that combined an intense Romantic sensibility with a gruff realism; a devotion to international high culture (especially opera) with an equal devotion to the local and the ordinary; a respect for the great literature, art and music of the past with a love of what was unique and unprecedented in the present. (61–62)

Shaw Neilson’s poetry combined the qualities of something ‘unique and unprecedented in the present’ — the literary present of Australia’s early twentieth century — and something tied to what might now be understood as the high culture of European/British Romanticism (although it began as a radical movement advocating the democratic inclusion of ‘the common reader’ into the aesthetic and practice of literary culture). In this, and in other ways, Shaw Neilson was a man of complexity whose poetry appeared to sit in an unlikely relationship to his life — a poetry of Romantic sensibility that sat in contradistinction to the life of ‘gruff realism’. In that talk on ‘the poet who never went to school’, Val asks his audience to ‘Listen for a moment to a stanza from one of his [Neilson’s] best-known poems’ (F1684):

Let your song be delicate.  
The flowers can hear:  
Too well they know the tremble,  
Of the hollow year.

Val comments that:

If this is the kind of poetry the man wrote, you may well expect that his life was a careful, sheltered one, offering plenty of time to stand and stare at the beauties of Nature around him. Nothing could be further from the truth. Like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson he humped his bluey along western roads in search of work. It is easy to understand their poetry. It tells of the characters they met, the funny and tragic incidents they witnessed. It is as though from the gnarled, tough exterior of life Paterson and Lawson tore off recognisable strips of bark. From the same tough tree Neilson plucked the rare, fragile orchids of his poetry. (F1684 2)

Where did those fragile orchids come from? What gave them existence? What conditions were necessary for their surprising creation, given not only the harshness of the life, but the lack of formal education? Val writes of a man ‘who received only four years’ schooling, intermittently, between his eighth and sixteenth years’ but about whom he ‘can’t help wondering’, ‘whether a more scholarly life would have helped or hindered him in his poetry’:

Book learning may have directed him to a wider variety of poems on which to model his ‘rhyme’ as he called them, but the simple lyric, the type of poetry in which he is supreme, is not to be achieved by imitation. It must just simply blossom naturally out of the soil of the poet’s own life. (F1684 1)

Poetry, wrote Keats, must come naturally, as leaves to a tree. Like the Romantics, and, perhaps unexpectedly, like Woolf, Val was dubious about the merit of education — not so much a matter of whether it was better to be locked in or locked out of a system that might act to constrict rather than free the mind, but whether the poet was perhaps better off listening to his ‘heart’ rather than his ‘head’. In an ABC broadcast made late in his life (1997), Val remembered how Douglas Stewart had warned him that (his late entrance to) university would ‘spoil him as a poet’ and reflects that ‘it did in a way’ because ‘there you think with your mind, not your heart (though I know you can feel with your mind too)’.<sup>1</sup>

‘Of course,’ Val concedes, ‘to write poetry requires some meagre supply of education, a knowledge of grammar and a certain vocabulary. But it requires a far more important thing, a gift of vision to see the miracle that lies in the ordinary things of the world’ (F1684 1). In this way, Neilson is clearly aligned with Blake: a man of vision, a man who in his own words, ‘lives by miracle’; and a poet like John Clare, who is a common reader, that is, a man of little formal education, with an uncommon ability to read and translate Nature into poetry. ‘It was in this place, Minimay in Victoria,’ Val explains, ‘that young Shaw Neilson grew to love the wild life that lived on the swamps — the ibis, the crane, the heron, the black swans, all to people his poetry many years later... This was the school-room in which Shaw Neilson learned the important things of his life’ (F1684 3).

Val said to me at one point that he struggled to write poetry now (in the late 1970s); that the inspiration or the vision had left — the muse didn’t visit him any more — and for this he was sad, because I think he felt that the poet’s calling was the highest of all callings. Perhaps too much book-learning, too much academia, had driven the muse away; but for many people who knew him, Val’s calling and his greatest gift was his capacity to teach. He gave all he knew to others with generosity and he inspired them with the love of his subject, whether that subject was philosophy, music or poetry.

Val’s slim volume of poems (*Dark Wind Blowing*) sits on my bookshelf next to a much-thumbed volume of Judith Wright’s collected poems and the volume of unpublished poems by John Shaw Neilson that he edited with Judith. It seems appropriate then to end this memorial essay with lines from Shaw Neilson’s poem, ‘Speech to a Rhymer’:

Good fellow of the Song  
 Be not too dismal it is you and I  
 And a few others lift the world along.

...

Let us deceive each other Love is all

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Notes by Paul Sherman from Val's broadcast on ABC Sunday Oct 18, 1997; recorded in the 'Val Vallis Scrapbook'; Val Vallis Archive, Fryer Library, University of Queensland. Accession No: 090320 (no F number yet). This commented is reiterated in slightly different form in the *Courier Mail* of Friday, October 17, 1997 in which, in answer to the reason why 'recent works are fewer', Val comments that his poetic muse has largely departed and that 'Doug Stewart got it right when he said [about Val's admission to University], 'I'm pleased for you Val, but it will bugger you as a poet — you'll start to see with your brain rather than your heart' (cutting in Scrapbook).

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