# Talking for Posterity

**Peter Porter 1929 – 2010**

If the eternal life in which Peter Porter did not believe had granted him permission to look down and check out the action shortly after his demise, he would have been interested in his obituaries. Self-deprecation having been his characteristic mode both in his art and in his life, he was always reluctant to claim a victory even when weighed down by the arrival of yet another van-load of laurels. But he might have been pleased to see how, in both Britain and Australia, those deputed in the media to lament his passing nearly all hailed him not just as an Australian poet, but as a poet of the English language. With his two nationalities blending into a global significance, a matter of contention had finally been settled, simply because he had spent so long being the man and artist that he was. His early poetry was so brilliant that the argument should have been over immediately, but sometimes the obvious answer can take a lifetime to become common wisdom.

He had spent much of his career caught in a fork, punished in Australia for trying to please the Poms, and punished in the UK for being an Aussie expatriate with a frame of reference above his station. Later on, he won acceptance in both camps, and by the time of his death he was a living example of the old country’s culture reinforcing itself with the energy of the new, and of the new country’s culture gaining scope from an expanded context. From the Australian viewpoint, if Les Murray was still the king of the stay-at-homes, Peter Porter was the king of the stay-aways, the position of expatriate artist having at last come to be seen as a contribution rather than a betrayal. For the British, his work and stature added up to a powerful reminder that the old Empire lived on as an intellectual event. In both countries, after his death, those who wrote about him awarded him so much admiration that even he would have been obliged to believe it, although undoubtedly he would have described it as part of a scheme to have his estate taxed twice.

Born in Queensland to a family in reduced circumstances, the young Peter was shunted off to a boot-camp boarding school just to get him out of the way, and was denied any university education because in those days if your father couldn’t pay, you couldn’t go. (A bit later on, the often mocked conservative prime minister R.G. Menzies changed all that with the Commonwealth Scholarship scheme, but too late to save Peter from discovering Brisbane’s shortcomings as a cosmopolitan metropolis.) His upbringing was scarcely the blacking factory, but he couldn’t be blamed for looking back on it as a non-event. To a painful extent, his character was shaped by what didn’t happen: nobody, as he later complained, was ever kissed less often. From that experience, or lack of it, grew his strange conviction that women found him negligible. (He was notorious for saying that there really *were* two nations, but they were the attractive and the unattractive.) He was too nice to notice that women found him adorable. At several stages in his life, before the advent of his second wife Christine removed his credibility as a victim of deprivation, I knew plenty of women who complained that they would have very much liked to kiss him but he wouldn’t stop telling them about Scarlatti.

Thus habituated from his earliest years to believing that even his good luck must be bad luck in disguise, Peter, established in London, had the grace to turn his own mental disposition into a joke, and many of us who knew him were glad to join in, sometimes making stuff up to boost the legend. He would come back to London from some Australian literary festival and recount how the Australian headliner poet had been given the luxury hotel’s penthouse suite with resident chef and dancing girls, whereas he, Porter, had been allotted a motel room on the fringe of town with one towel and a stale cheese sandwich. Glad to be at the same rocking table, we evoked, with his delighted participation, what would happen when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Instead of receiving it from the hands of King Carl XVI Gustaf in Stockholm, he would be asked to pick it up from Sweden’s assistant cultural attaché in the car-park of Stevenage railway station.

Possibly he took too much pleasure in running himself down. When you are speaking to the media, the trouble with modesty is that the reporters tend to agree with it, just as, when someone has a high opinion of himself, the reporters tend to agree with that. As I tried to tell him by way of a parable, a certain famous writer who wore dark glasses indoors did the right thing when he assured a journalist it was because his nervous system was so sensitive. The famous writer’s putative sensitivity had been the first characteristic discussed in any profile written about him ever since. A lover of literary gossip, Peter reveled in this information, but did not change his ways. Speaking to an interviewer concerned with the eternal non-question of which of his two nations he felt nationalistic about, Peter said “patriotism and allegiance are small matters in comparison with my egotism.” He was lucky that “Aussie Poet Admits Ego” was not the headline of the piece.

In truth, he had very little egotism, and might have been better off if he’d had more. Instead, at the heart of his nature was generosity, to the extent that it sometimes threatened to be his undoing. Though his financial position was always parlous and could scarcely be saved by his industry as a first-string critic for the *TLS*, the*Observer* and the BBC— only a culture gets enriched by that kind of effort, not the contributor – he would give time he didn’t have to any demands from the poetic world, immolating his energies in symposia, conferences and doomed readings in the upstairs rooms of penniless literary societies. This particular form of generosity would often extend to inviting Australian poets visiting London to billet themselves in his flat. Apart from judging a poetry competition, I myself couldn’t think of anything more likely to ruin the concentration necessary to write poetry. Peter, however, didn’t think that way. He had no idea of rationing his energies, and anyway, as his prolific output of verse proved, he didn’t believe in the jealous nurturing of a few fine things, Flaubert-style. Indeed his role models weren’t from literature at all: they were from music. He was fond of saying that Bach’s cantatas would have been no more marvelous had their been fewer of them.

Peter already knew a lot about classical music before he first left home and he wasn’t far into his London residency before he had learned everything. The geology of the flat in Cleveland Square altered in recent years when the ranks and banks of LPs were supplemented by rows of CDs. But though he often told interviewers that he rated music above literature, it is important, once again, for us to watch his words. He loved literature as much as anyone can who takes pains in adding to it. At our last meeting, during that strange period when the sky was silent and we were all ruled by the moods of an Icelandic volcano, he was typically eloquent about the arts, about which he had always had the rare gift of speaking with unapologetic enthusiasm. He was frail, and sometimes his speech came slowly, but we still had our usual fight about the later Wallace Stevens, whom Peter revered and I find suspect, and somewhere in the conversation, casually but strikingly, he let slip the remark that he thought nothing could beat the feeling of writing a poem at that moment when the poem takes over and starts to write itself.

Even though there would clearly be not much more of it, this was magic talk of the kind that I, like all his friends, had grown so used to over the years that we tended to take it for granted. I often had to remind myself that hardly anyone could speak like this. Alive a long time and active all over the cultural map, Peter joined several literary groups together, but in one of them I was lucky enough to be included, and when the gang now known as the Friday Lunch used to meet each week, often he and I would be the last two left at the end, and the subject of the conversation was almost always the arts. He was a walking university, except that you rarely encounter that kind of range in a university. As time went by I got better at playing feed-man in a routine that I could see was a stage-show in the making. This was proved true one year at the Melbourne Festival, when, at short notice, Peter and I were pushed on stage by the tridents of the organizers, having been told to improvise an hour’s conversation. As usual we both quoted reams of poetry from memory. It caused a sensation among the young people in the audience, not because what we remembered was so unusual, but because for them it was so unusual to find someone remembering anything.

The ABC arts producer Jill Kitson was in the audience and she suggested that we might, when we got back to London, go into the ABC’s studio in Great Portland Street and record a set of six broadcasts along the same lines. Eventually there were six seasons of them recorded at the rate of one season a year, and in Australia they became a staple of arts broadcasting, with Peter’s knowledge and easy eloquence remarked on by thousands of listeners. Though he never knew, in my opinion, how to read his own poetry aloud, Peter was an ace broadcaster from a script. But he was even better off the cuff, and in those shows he is at his dazzling best, as fluent and entertaining as he was in real life. On behalf of his reputation, if not of mine, I might suggest that it would be good if the BBC could pick them up. They are all on my website (an enterprise he rather approved of, because it took endless labour and made no money, a pattern he recognized) but his contribution deserves a far wider audience that that.

The forthcoming book of selected poems, *The* *Rest on the Flight*, will doubtless provide the core of his heritage. I hope it will sell the way Larkin’s *Collected Poems* did, like snow-cones in the Sahara. Wedded to tumultuous simultaneity and sometimes, it seemed to me, to outright obscurity, Peter was rarely as approachable as Larkin, but he shared the gift of the phrase that lodged in the reader’s head. At its best, his poetry spoke the way he did. “Auden didn’t love God, he just found him attractive.” I can hear him saying it now. In the broadcasts, he proved that he could say things like that all the time. Dr Johnson might have talked for victory, but Peter seemed to talk for posterity.

When we last met, it was the only thing I said that was good enough to match him. Complaining away as hilariously as usual about the injustice of the literary world, he said he didn’t care about posterity. “You don’t have to,” I said. “For you, it’s already here.” Surely I was right for once. While he yet lived, so many people thought he was great that not even he could have believed they were in league to do him down. But he could never have played the hero, because for him it was creativity itself that had the heroic status, beyond politics, beyond patriotism, beyond even personal happiness. It’s the reason why his work is like that. His poetry, so wonderful when it is really flying, isn’t trying to tell you how much he knows. It’s giving thanks for how much there is to be known.

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