

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

George W. Turner, 'Portrait of a Friend: Peter Meredith', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 29 (1998), 7-8

Permanent URL:

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Leeds Studies in English
School of English
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Portrait of a Friend: Peter Meredith

George W. Turner

Mine has the best flavour

The sentence is grammatically adequate, but is so general in possible context that it seems incomplete. What has the flavour? Fruit? Sweets? Cake? Who is it that has it? Put into a context these elements take on a more precise shape. Peter Meredith and Greta and Thomas (born 6 a.m. 22 November 1965) have come down to meet a fellow academic (me) who will share with them a summer holiday in Sheringham. I had worked closely with Peter in the English Department at the University of Adelaide from 1965, when I began at Adelaide, until 1968, when Peter went on study leave and subsequently moved to Leeds. We shared the same specialty, Old and Middle English (quaintly called 'the language side' by administrators), had rooms on the same corridor, even shared a telephone extension. (We often wondered if we could ring each other up across the corridor but when we put it to the test, the line was engaged.) It is against this background that, on the way to meet me a decade later, the family had bought ice-creams so that, following some friendly rivalry as to who had chosen the best flavouring, fate had determined that in 1978 Peter would greet me with the words *Mine has the best flavour*.

People who have been separated usually meet uttering sociolinguistic stereotypes of the 'did you have a good trip?' or 'you'll find the place changed' or 'long time no see' kind and they have kept their sense of separation alive, as well as assuaging it, by writing letters. Now Peter never writes letters, and feels no compulsion to use epistolary formulas in speech, which may serve to preserve hierarchies and vantage points as much as friendships. Peter's greeting seems to me to suggest something that is permanent, an assumption that a friendship is always there. It is no trivial point; it reflects a pervasive characteristic.

It begins with Peter's way with students. The rumour that he knew the students' birthdays and exonerated them from translating on those days is true. (It was rather a mark of affection than relief from arduous ordeal, for translating round the class from Old and Middle English texts is a happy enough activity; in fact he submitted himself to it by coming to my class in Old Icelandic.) If one word were to be chosen to characterize medieval studies in the English Department at Adelaide, that word would be *enjoyment*. It is a tradition going back to Professor R. V. W. Elliott,

who moved from Adelaide to Flinders University in 1965. It suited Peter's temperament too and there was a brief Golden Age with a kind of generalized friendship before the era of student unrest reached our shores. An English Honours course then normally included Old and Middle English (the exception being students combining two subjects). The cohesive group was well suited to organizing medieval feasts and much research ensured their authenticity. There was some concern when it was realized that medieval people did not have potatoes, but history was nudged forward a little, and the fortunate arrival of some explorers from the new lands to the west allowed the piping in with great ceremony of the strange new vegetable.

A feast is an occasion for singing and a group of English students and staff had a rich repertoire of catches and tavern songs (I particularly liked one with the words 'George is a good boy . . .'). Hearing a nun join in singing 'Adam caught Eve by the furbelow', I reflected that here the sense of academic community was alive and well. Peter has a fine voice and contributed to the musical welfare of the group.

Particularly suitable for weekend camps were plays. In May 1966, in a camp at Goolwa near the mouth of the Murray, the Towneley play *The Harrowing of Hell* was read. (On the same night there was a dramatic intrusion of a knight clad entirely in green!) In 1968 the Chester play *Noah's Flood* was performed as part of an open day. Peter confided to me once that he would like to act in a Creation play just to savour the headline in the local South Australian newspaper, 'SA man plays God'.

Not all the plays were medieval; others studied at the weekend camps were *The Birthday Party* in 1965 and *Look Back in Anger* in 1966. Peter's enthusiasm for acting went beyond limitations of period or genre. He was a memorable Gama in *Princess Ida* for instance. Such breadth of interest is particularly useful in English departments where rivalries develop over funds and emphases in curricula and a division between older and modern literature impoverishes both. A division between medieval literature and modern drama, the most and least 'linguistic', is particularly likely, and that is the one that Peter so notably transcends. It is among other things a bridge between Academia and 'out there'. He may well lay claim to that most honorific title of 'teacher', whether he is talking about the evaluation of children's literature to a conference of librarians, or developing courses in the academic study of children's literature, showing slides of Sutton Hoo to his students, or introducing Anglo-Saxon art to the English Association.

Once when we were discussing what we would have been in an ideal world which allowed us to choose our vocation, he told me he would like to have been a noble. He would have made a good one.