

Introduction

Martin Johnston was one of a generation of poets who invigorated Australian poetry in the late 1960s and 1970s. His contribution was unusual: he had a European upbringing, having spent fourteen years of his childhood abroad, in England and Greece. His connections with Island Press and the University of Queensland Press, with the poetry readings at Sydney University, with the group of young writers including Laurie Duggan, Carl Harrison-Ford and Robert Adamson who were busy overhauling *New Poetry* magazine, are very much a part of the ferment of that period.

Martin's angle on things was very much his own, though. He might have loved John Berryman's work and learned much from contemporary American poetry, but he had also read Cavafy and Seferis in their native Greek years before, and had immersed himself in Homer as a child.

Martin also worked as a cadet reporter, a freelance book reviewer and a subeditor and subtitler of television programs for SBS. He travelled to Europe many times, returning to Greece to live for some years, and exploring France, Italy and Germany as well as the British Isles. He had a strong sense of political engagement as well as an appetite for esoteric philosophies and complex cultural detail, and all this material helped to form his thinking and his practice as a writer, though he was not a remote intellectual in any sense. He enjoyed literary conversation, but he was just as happy talking with old fishermen in a Greek village taverna.

When Martin died in June 1990 at the age of forty-two we suffered a real loss: his writing had grown and matured, and in the last decade his best poems had developed a haunting intensity. What he left unwritten is sad to contemplate. What he bequeathed us, though, is as much as many writers achieve in a lifetime: a generous and varied body of writing that speaks in a distinctive voice, and articulates a dedication to the creative life. With its deeply felt doubts, its joy in learning, and its relish in the exercise of an ancient craft, it is a project worthy of a scholar-poet of the Renaissance.

By the time he was in his early forties Martin had published the novel *Cicada Gambit*, a collection of translations of Greek poems titled *Ithaka*,

and three books of poetry: *Shadowmass*, *The Sea-Cucumber* and *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*. It seemed time to take stock of the direction of his work, and he had talked about putting together a selection of his best poems. His books of poetry had been published in small editions, and much of it was no longer readily available. Also, Martin had produced a lot of strong new poetry in 1988 and 1989, and he had plans for more: he said he was drafting a sequence of poems comparing the boxer Mike Tyson to the Greek hero Achilles, for example, though no copies of these poems have turned up.

By that stage the untimely deaths of most of his close family, as well as the effects of his alcoholism, had deprived him of the strength and the concentration to carry these new projects through to completion.

I knew from my own experience that the compilation of a "Selected Poems" is a difficult task. It involves the writer in a seriously critical role, and a lot of writing that has been painstakingly worked on over the years has to be dumped overboard for good. It is also emotionally demanding, as the writer is obliged to resurrect and weigh up the past.

For Martin at this time such a rehearsal of his life was distressing, and he seemed unhappy about attempting it on his own, so early in 1990 I offered to help him compile a selection of his poems for the present publisher, University of Queensland Press, who had published his *The Sea-Cucumber* twelve years before.

Martin was keen on the idea, but we had not done much more than talk about the project when he died.

While this made it even more important to gather a comprehensive collection of his best poetry, it also seemed to me that there was scope for a more generous book. Many of his early poems were out of print: I felt at least some of them deserved to find a new audience. And I thought the reader would like to have an idea of Martin's interests, his unusual background growing up in England and on a Greek island, and his tone of voice; so I included a number of his essays and book reviews, and some translations of Greek poetry and folk-song. Other related material seemed worth adding, too: interviews, a fragment of an unfinished novel, a selection of working notes to some later poems written mainly in Italy, reviews of his various books by other writers, a handful of photographs.

What results is, I hope, a broad view of the career of a writer with a brilliant mind, an unusual schooling and an extraordinarily wide range of interests.

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Martin Johnston was born in Sydney in November 1947. Both his parents George Johnston and Charmian Clift wrote for a living: they were journalists when they met, and both went on to write fiction, including three collaborative novels. George's reputation is largely based on the trilogy of autobiographical novels beginning with *My Brother Jack*, and Charmian's on her essays and weekly newspaper columns.

Martin was born three months after they were married, Charmian "radiantly and unashamedly with child", according to a journalist friend. When he was three his parents took him and his baby sister Shane to England where his father had been put in charge of the London office of Associated Newspaper Services, publisher of the *Sun*. When his parents travelled on the Continent for research or on summer vacation, they would leave the two children at a holiday farm in Hertfordshire.

In November 1954, when Martin was just seven, his parents broke away from their life in London journalism to make a fresh start as serious writers in Greece. They were to remain there for a decade. First they lived on the barren island of Kalymnos, where the mainstay industry of sponge-diving was in decline. Nine months later they moved to the island of Hydra, forty miles from Athens. Martin's brother Jason was born there in 1956, without the services of doctor or hospital.

After a childhood in Sydney and London, Martin found the local Greek school hard to adjust to, but adjust he did, and in his final exams on Hydra he came first in his class overall and first in both classical and modern Greek. His prodigious memory skills were forged in the school examination system there, which required the word-perfect regurgitation of memorised Greek texts.

I have mentioned that both his parents were working writers, and it was natural that Martin would want to write, too. At about the age of eight, according to one interview he gave (or twelve, according to another) he began to write rhymed poems dealing with the theory of evolution, taking Ogden Nash as his model. A precocious novella followed, with illustrations by the author, about a disinterred mammoth who became an atheist Oxbridge professor; it is now lost. It was typed rather than handwritten. Though Martin learned to write longhand Greek at school, he assumed from his parents' daily routine that English was always typed, and he taught himself hunt-and-peck typing.

In 1955–56, when Martin was eight, violence broke out in Cyprus,

which was fighting for its independence from Britain and for union with Greece. On Hydra as elsewhere throughout the country there was strong anti-British feeling. Martin had spent three years in England, and the family had many friends there; he was torn between the two loyalties. Charmian Clift sketched these stresses in her book *Peel Me a Lotus*:

Damn my own naïvete in believing for a minute that one was going to dodge labels and categories even on this small grey rock in the Mediterranean. I thought of my son, who had stood up behind his desk at school in all the eight-year-old's agony of tears and conspicuousness to refute his teacher's assertion that the English were beasts and bloody butchers. I thought of my wild little daughter whooping through the lanes with her yellow hair flying, playing at revolutions. I thought of my baby, born a stranger in a strange land who would probably have to learn his mother tongue as a foreign language.

The cultural shifts Martin was put through as a growing child and adolescent were cataclysmic: Australia in the late 1940s, London, a Greek village, a different Greek village, an English country town, Greece, Australia in the 1960s. The psychological dislocation that accompanied these successive deracinations must have been painful, and I think an anxious sense of being cut off from his roots followed Martin all his life. His efforts to surround himself with his well-thumbed books, old friends and familiar routines and surroundings very likely stemmed from those experiences.

On Hydra, his parents' marriage was not always as idyllic as the Mediterranean island setting. They drank more than was good for them, and fought in front of the children. They found it hard to make a living from their writing, and they were in debt for many years. Martin says they lived very much "hand to mouth", and remembers the day a big cheque came in from an American book club and they were finally able to pay off the grocery bill which they had run up for two years at Katsikas's, the local shop. "It was an absolutely astonishing day," he told me. "I remember my parents getting staggeringly plastered." The children were often left to the housekeeper to mind, or left to their own devices, as many of the Greek children on the island were. As Martin said in 1989, "The way my parents lived has perhaps been disastrous for me in the long term, in that what they did was, they wrote very hard. . . they wrote from say seven in the morning till midday, and then, then went down to the waterfront and got pissed. And I suppose that's a pattern of life that I've followed ever since. . ."

Another problem was Martin's poor eyesight. He suffered from myopia, but the problem was not noticed or corrected until he was twelve.

In late 1960, his father, fed up with six years of trying to make a living writing potboilers, took his family back to England to try his hand at journalism again. He failed, and only the outright gift of money from friends enabled the family to survive. (A notable benefactor, according to Martin, was the actor Peter Finch.) The Johnstons had exchanged their Hydra house for one in the village of Stanton near Broadway in the Cotswolds, a hundred miles from London. Trying to fit into life there was difficult; Martin later described that year as "sheer unadulterated hell". Strangers to the English curriculum — their schoolwork had been in Greek up until then — Martin and Shane had not sat for their vital Eleven-Plus exams, and had to put up with what education they could get at the local school, Winchcombe Secondary Modern. They returned to Hydra in 1961.

Early in 1964 George Johnston's fortunes turned: his autobiographical novel *My Brother Jack* was published in London and became an instant success. He returned to Australia to launch the book there, where it was received enthusiastically: the first eight thousand copies sold out in less than a month. He was also there to scout out the land in preparation for the family's return. George liked the more prosperous, more relaxed and more outward-looking Australia he saw, and Charmian and the three children obtained assisted passages under the migrant scheme (as Martin put it: "for ten quid apiece"), boarded the *Ellinis*, and joined him there in August 1964.

When Martin arrived in Australia after fourteen years away, it was very much a foreign country to him. The accent was strange, the food was dull, and they played Rugby, the wrong kind of football — Martin played soccer, and was an avid fan of the Greek team Olympiakos Piraeus. Now aged seventeen, he was six feet tall and very thin.

But this time he was luckier with his education. He won a place at North Sydney Boys' High, a top selective school with a good reputation, where he quickly adapted to the different educational system. He was able to develop his interest in music, literature and chess, and he made many friends among the other boys. In his final exams he did very well in Ancient Greek and English, though he failed Mathematics.

He went on in 1966 to attend Sydney University for two years of Arts, majoring in English. Though he achieved distinction grades in some

subjects and won various literary prizes, he found the English Department neither pleasant nor stimulating: morale had been damaged by a virulent split into pro- and anti-Leavis factions in the mid-1960s.

In 1968 he left university without completing his degree, which disappointed his father, and took up a career as a cadet journalist with the *Sydney Morning Herald*; but before two years were out he had resigned to take up freelance writing. He could give a prepared speech or read his poems before an audience, but he was shy and tongue-tied on the phone; this and his ardent interest in intellectual and aesthetic pursuits made him unsuited to the practical world of Australian journalism. While he was with the *Herald* he did the police rounds, a 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. shift. In her article for the *Herald* in 1973 Margaret Jones said he found it "a traumatic experience". Later, on the weekly *Sun-Herald*, he ghosted a surfing column, and wrote "Dog of the Week". He liked telling the story about the time he dubbed a stray "Cerberus"; the subeditor thundered at him: "No classical references in Dog of the Week!"

In Greece a military Junta had taken power in April 1967, and Martin and his family were strongly opposed to it. He and his sister Shane were associated with the organisation set up in Australia called the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Greece, as were his parents. Shane worked as secretary to the editor of the anti-Junta newspaper in Australia, the *Hellenic Herald*.

Martin also addressed the issue in various book reviews, and in the poem "To Greece Under the Junta" which was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 1968.

Also in 1968 he was fined \$30 on minor charges arising from an anti-Vietnam War demonstration he attended, an offence he repeated in 1971.

In July 1969 Martin's mother committed suicide. His elegy for her was titled obliquely "Letter to Sylvia Plath", with the notation "*in memoriam* Charmian Clift" discreetly reduced to initials: "i.m. C.C.". It won a university literary competition, and was published in the Sydney University *Union Recorder* in September and again in October 1970; also in *Poetry Magazine* (later to become *New Poetry*) in December 1970, and in Philip Roberts's annual *Poet's Choice* in the same year.

Almost exactly a year later Martin's father died. He had collapsed with pneumonia in Hydra in the winter of 1956-57, and developed a chronic lung problem. It was diagnosed as tuberculosis, and the doctor he saw in

Athens had prescribed drugs and rest, and advised cutting down on smoking and drinking. (George wrote a tense and atmospheric story, "The Verdict", about this episode.) He took the drugs, but worked, worried, smoked and drank heavily for much of the rest of his life, and spent more and more frequent periods in hospital as his lung problems grew worse. His doctor blamed his death on the tuberculosis, together with heavy smoking.

Martin's poem for his father, "The Sea-Cucumber" (again an oblique elegy; the poem was ostensibly dedicated to the painter Ray Crooke) was published in the October 1970 issue of *New Poetry* magazine.

In his 1980 interview with Hazel de Berg Martin reflected on these events:

. . . part of the rather confused . . . a bit self-consciously bohemian life I was living in the early 1970s had to do with the deaths of my parents, which followed rather quickly upon one another, in 1969, and in 1970, and, well, my mother's death certainly had an absolutely shattering effect upon all the family, and my father's death about a year after that, had upon me. . . now I think what that poem ["Letter to Sylvia Plath"] most conveys, or I supposed what it was most intended to convey, was sheer horror. I was appalled at my mother's death, coming as it did and when it did, whereas when my father died, it was tragic and terrible; it was also something that we had all been very much expecting, himself included, for a good many years, and so that's very much the tone of the elegy that I wrote for him. . .

The popularity of these two poems both troubled and pleased Martin; they must have been painful for him to write. His friends and fellow-poets Charles Buckmaster and Michael Dransfield died in 1972 and 1973 respectively, and the older poet Francis Webb also died in 1973. Their deaths were followed by a flurry of public elegies. Martin faced his complex and ambiguous feelings with scarifying directness in the poem "In Memoriam", which mentions Dransfield, Buckmaster and Webb. It ends "Not that you wouldn't have gone there yourselves willingly: / where the blood pours out the dead come to the feast."

Martin's first book of poems, *Shadowmass*, was published in 1971 by Sydney University Arts Society Publications, which was made up of Martin and the other two young poets whose work was published at the same time, Terry Larsen and Andrew Huntley.

Martin was in his early twenties, and beginning to stretch his wings. He joined the editorial board of *New Poetry* for one year, from the August

1971 issue to the June 1972 issue. His poem "The Blood Aquarium" was published in the April 1971 issue of the magazine, and won respect from many poets of his generation, though it baffled others. It was a long piece, full of complex philosophical allusions from a dozen cultures and periods. Around that time other young poets were essaying long sequences of poems, each in very different styles: Robert Adamson's "The Rumour", Alan Wearne's "Out Here", my own "Red Movie".

This blend of experiment and ambition was part of the times: the early 1970s saw social experiment and political change on a large scale, and writers and artists felt themselves involved in those shifts in an important way. Martin's philosophy was strongly left-wing, he marched in anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, and in the early 1970s he would stroll about Glebe in a velvet cloak, with his long hair flowing about his shoulders. He never changed his hair-style, though it looked increasingly out of fashion as the years and then the decades wore on. It suited his role as the archetypal poet and scholar, in a European sense; in Australia, such a figure was always the odd man out.

His father George Johnston, not long before he died in 1970, had painted a picture of Martin in *A Cartload of Clay*, his unfinished autobiographical novel. The character that represents Martin was called "Julian", who ". . . carried a placard in an anti-war demonstration or wore hippie badges — Julian with his shyness and sensitivity, his bewildered gropings for a place in a society concerned with things and not with ideas, his trance-like absorption in his music and poetry, his endless intellectual searchings, his gentleness".

Apart from literature Martin's other passion in life was chess. He had taken it up in Greece, and he played the game with skill and enjoyment for the rest of his life. It was far more than a hobby. He did well in serious competition, and he used chess as the major structural metaphor for his only novel. I also think that the lessons of chess, with its emphasis on individual talent and not on class background or schooling, had a lot to do with Martin's considerable charm. Over the chessboard he had long ago learnt that a bus driver might well display a grandmaster's grasp of strategy and beat a professor of philosophy. It was an arena where one's education, manners and social standing were manifestly irrelevant to one's intellectual ability. Martin was used to talking with respect and total absorption to virtually anybody, as long as they had something interesting to say.

In 1970 the Canadian poet Philip Roberts, who had joined the English

Department at Sydney University as a lecturer, had established Island Press and had begun to publish books of poetry, using handset metal type and a treadle-driven platen press. He encouraged Martin to compile a collection of modern Greek poetry in English translation, and in 1973 Island Press published Martin's translations of six Greek folk poems and twenty-six modern poems under the title *Ithaka*, with drawings by Martin and Neville Drury, a friend from North Sydney Boys' High and a fellow-passenger on the *Ellinis*. A selection of those poems is included in this book.

Late in 1973 Martin was awarded a one-year \$5000 Literature Board Young Writer's Fellowship, to enable him to write a biography or memoir of his parents in which the publisher William Collins had expressed interest. Martin found the psychological distress that came from trying to deal with their lives and their deaths painful, and he abandoned the project for the time being. He attempted it again later, but the book was never written. He soon transferred his energies to reworking and expanding a short story titled "Heady", which developed into what Martin later called "this impossibly bad novel", *Cicada Gambit*. At the time it was considered too experimental for any Australian publisher to handle, according to Carl Harrison-Ford, and was not to see print for another decade.

In October 1974 his younger sister Shane committed suicide. Martin was devastated. Though Shane was not so interested in the world of books and ideas, they had grown up together, and they had worked side by side in the late 1960s in the cause of Greek democracy. Martin had dedicated *Ithaka* to Shane as a tribute to their shared love of things Greek.

Late in 1975 Martin went to Greece with his girlfriend Nadia Wheatley, planning to live there for a year or two and write. He went there, as he says, "after the Junta fell"; his political activities against the dictatorship would have made it awkward to go there any earlier, and the Greek resistance had appealed to foreign travellers not to take their tourist dollars to Greece while the Junta still held power.

They settled in Khania on the island of Crete, and set up a routine of writing solidly six days a week. Later they moved to Astros, then back to Crete. In 1977, worn out by the struggle every three months to obtain Greek residency permits and wishing to find English publishers for Martin's poems, as well as decent bookshops, they took a bus to London via Yugoslavia. In the northern summer of 1978, after visiting Ireland,

England and Scotland, they returned to write and travel some more in Greece, then came home to Australia.

During his time in Greece Martin wrote new poems and revised old ones, drafted a long sequence of poems set among various Greek landscapes which was to become "To the Innate Island", and further revised the manuscript of "Cicada Gambit".

He also spent time on two ill-fated publishing projects, in the hope that they would earn him some money. The first was a volume which was to be the introduction and critical overview to the science fiction component of a series of books on genre fiction to be edited by Stephen Knight. The series was dropped by the publishers and the book was never published.

The second was the *Memoirs* of Sotiris Spatharis, the Greek shadow-puppet player. In June 1977 Martin discovered that a translation had already been brought out by a small American publisher. Two months' work was made useless, and he abandoned the project.

More importantly, he was also revising the manuscript of his second book of poems (his third, if you count *Ithaka*) for University of Queensland Press, rewriting, correcting proofs and writing new poems including "Microclimatology", which is drawn directly from his experiences in Greece. The book was published in 1978 as *The Sea-Cucumber*, the fifteenth volume of the Paperback Poets Second Series. It marked his arrival as a mature poet, and it might be useful to turn aside here for a moment to reflect on what made his writing distinctive.

Christopher Pollnitz, reviewing *The Sea-Cucumber* in *Southerly* magazine, said that "the title poem. . . is one of the handful of major Australian poems this decade. About the volume as a whole there is a professionalism, a sense of rigorous intellectual training, which makes most other current Australian poetry seem amateur by comparison. . ."

But not everybody liked Martin's poetry, or the way it was developing. Early in 1979 the manuscript of "To the Innate Island" was rejected by Richard Walsh, publisher of Angus & Robertson; the firm's poetry advisers were Les Murray and Vivian Smith. Walsh's letter reads in part "we. . . find something lacking — what one reader described as 'the still centre, the core of repose from which poetry springs'."

Les Murray commented on the manuscript to Martin, in an aside written by hand as one of two postscripts to a photocopied circular letter, a request to Martin to submit work for an American magazine. Les said,

among other comments: "It's wonderfully rich, evocative and vivacious, but I fear you've left the poetry out."

These two responses — Pollnitz's and Murray's — point to one of the categorisation problems poetry-readers faced in the 1970s. Martin's interest in writers like John Berryman and Jorge Luis Borges linked him to the younger Australian poets of the time, many of whom were his friends, who were responding vigorously to the work of some North American and Latin American poets. The writers collected in Donald Hall's *Contemporary American Poetry* (1962) and in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960) had a notable influence on the development of poetry in Australia for two decades or more, as did translations from the work of writers like Borges and Octavio Paz. Some readers saw Martin as belonging to a group of pro-American experimental writers, though they should have noted these lines from his poem "Gradus Ad Parnassum": "And the groovier modern Americans? They seem to be the context / I'm supposed to work in, though I mostly haven't read them."

Martin's passion for ancient and mediaeval philosophers, artists, and poets, and for formally complex writing and thinking generally, inclined him to keep a sceptical distance from the enthusiasms of his colleagues. Having grown up in England and Greece (he had a careful, hesitant English accent all his life) he naturally did not feel that he "belonged" to his own generation in Australia, though he made dozens of friends among them. And like the problem of his cultural location — he was not really Greek, but not really Australian, either — his literary position was difficult to read: he could seem a radical iconoclast to some, and a bookish formalist to others.

In Australia the problem of expatriation shifted with the generations, as the country struggled out from under its colonial past and sought a new identity for itself. Peter Porter, who left for England in 1951 and worked to become a British if not a specifically metropolitan London man of letters, represented one answer to the problem of provincialism: leave the province and attach yourself to the cultural life at the centre. Thousands of other Australian did the same in the decade after the Second World War, Martin's parents among them.

Many returned after a few years of struggle overseas to continue their work at home. Much earlier, Henry Lawson and Christopher Brennan had been part of that melancholy caravan; later and more resilient voyagers were Patrick White and David Malouf. Others returned when

their main work was almost finished: Christina Stead was one; George Johnston, in a way, could be seen as another.

And looking at expatriation from the other side of the fence, many people left their homes abroad and migrated to Australia, and then began a career as writers in an alien environment: Dimitris Tsaloumas, David Martin, Andrew Riemer, Douglas Stewart, Ania Walwicz, and many more.

Martin was one of these migrants, too, and it helps to remember how foreign he was. When he stepped ashore in Sydney in 1964 it was to confront a culture in transformation, one he had not seen since he was a child of three. The Greek translations in this collection, and the Greek scenery and artefacts that feature in the poems Martin wrote in English, mark the importance of this “foreign” theme. It was a strong presence in his work from his teenage years, when he began translating Greek folk poems, to the last year of his life, when he was engaged on a biographical novel about the revolutionary General Makriyannis, who taught himself to read and write his own language, Greek, in middle age. (See “The Good General”, p.149.)

As with all migrant writing, the traces of the other culture are borne on an undercurrent of loss; a loss that in Martin’s case had grown more painful with the death of his parents and then his sister.

During 1979 Martin met Roseanne Bonney. She was nearly ten years older than Martin, and had a career of her own as a criminologist, and two teenage children. The relationship may have seemed unlikely to Martin’s friends, but they fell in love and were soon living together. They married three years later, in October 1982. Martin developed an immediate affection for his stepchildren, and settled happily into the inner-city life of the Sydney suburb of Darlinghurst, where Roseanne had a house.

In May 1979 the Literature Board of the Australia Council offered him a Special Purpose Grant of \$3000. He had applied for the grant to enable him to do further work on the biography of his parents, and he left for Greece with Roseanne to do research for the book.

For the culmination of a year that had begun so well, the journey was an extraordinary series of disasters. Martin travelled, sometimes alone, to London and Oxford, Amsterdam, London, Athens, Hydra, and Athens again. During the trip he was attacked by a man who tried to rape him in Patras, lost his luggage on Bulgarian Airlines, was detained for twelve hours and body-searched by British Customs (no doubt because of his

long hair and generally bohemian appearance), had his new clothes and a bag stolen in London, had one hundred pounds stolen in a train, was stranded in Calais, and found to his dismay that his hotel on Hydra was formerly the house where a family friend had hung himself (see the poem "The Plato's Cave Hotel", p.63.) His last stop was Athens, where he was marooned for two months alone and with virtually no money because of a bank strike. The events of this stay, in the Hotel Tempi, are reflected in the "In Transit" sonnet sequence. He arrived back in Sydney in March 1980.

In June he was interviewed by Hazel de Berg for the National Library of Australia. ". . .as well as preparing my fourth book of poetry," he said (counting *Ithaka* as his second book), "I'm now engaged on a biography of my parents. . . I try to deal with this whole problem of family, tracing the roots back as far as they go till they tail rather incomprehensibly out, in one of a recent sequence of sonnets. . .[it] is simply called 'Biography', because what set it off was precisely my feeling of the enormous problems of writing a biography of one's parents."

He found a job in July that year — his first regular employment in a decade — translating Greek movies and television programs and editing subtitles for the new Special Broadcasting Service at Milsons Point. Martin made many close friends among the polyglot staff, and the Subtitling Unit of SBS became almost another family for him.

In 1981 Martin travelled to Greece again. Like his father, he was a heavy drinker and an incessant smoker, and on one occasion he set alight to his mattress by smoking in bed.

His novel *Cicada Gambit* appeared from Hale & Iremonger in December 1983. And in June 1985, the same firm launched what was to be his last published volume of poems, *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap*. It included two sequences that relate to his travels in Greece: "In Transit: A Sonnet Square" (fourteen fourteen-line poems) and the long sequence "To the Innate Island", the poem Angus & Robertson had declined six years before.

During the next three years he made three visits to Europe with Roseanne. Through the late 1980s his liking for alcohol became a problem, and he found he was not producing much poetry. He decided to take a full year's leave from his job at SBS in 1988 in order to live in Europe and devote time to his writing. He made it a productive period, moderating his drinking and working steadily at his poetry and the novel

based on the life of General Makriyannis, in the Tuscan farmhouse he and Roseanne had rented. The house was poorly heated, and in late August the isolation, the primitive conditions, and the thought of another freezing winter led them to move to the Greek island of Lesbos. Early in 1989 he returned to Australia.

In an interview he said of this period: "I have never been an enormous believer in the notion of inspiration or the descent of the muses or whatever, which is perhaps contradicted by the fact that the Sydney muses hadn't visited me for a long, long time, whereas the Tuscan ones, not to mention the Lesbian ones later on, did." During 1988 he completed more than fifteen strong poems, produced extensive research notes and drafts for the opening of his novel on General Makriyannis, and completed work on translations of thirty or so Greek folk songs, a project he had begun as a teenager (many of which are included here.)

Just before he returned to Australia, tragedy struck again. For some years Martin's older half-sister Gae Johnston had been a drug user. She died of a drug overdose towards the end of 1988.

Apart from Martin's younger brother Jason, all his immediate family had died prematurely and in tragic circumstances, and the weight of his loss became unendurable. By the time he and Roseanne returned to Australia in early 1989 his drinking had become a disabling illness. He struggled to deal with it, but in his emotionally exhausted condition Gae's death weighed on him heavily.

Over the next year he spent some weeks in rehabilitation clinics. On 16 June 1990 he collapsed and was taken to hospital. He regained consciousness, but a few days later fell into a coma. He died at 5 a.m. on 21 June 1990.