

Jennifer Maiden: Extract from '**The Cuckold and the Vampires**: an essay on some aspects of conservative manipulation of art and literature, including experimental, and the conservatives' creation of conflict', Quemar Press, Penrith, 2020

p .31: *After a wide-ranging discussion, the essayist 'return[s] to the subject of politics and addiction':*

I have begun trying to work out a little the nature of the group of Australian poets who were considered new and experimental here in the late Sixties and in the Seventies. I did not move in their social circle, although occasionally I visited it, and was often thought to be one of them. Two among the poets I thought most overtly left-wing in public matters such as opposing the Vietnam War and opposing Conservative Governments were Martin Johnston and John Forbes, and both were said to have died eventually from addiction: Forbes to cough mixture and Johnston to alcohol as such. As with Dylan Thomas - and indeed Malcolm Lowry - the residual persona may now be more about the addiction than the politics.

This leads to a discussion of John Forbes, followed by two recollections of Martin Johnston.

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Johnston was the son of the writers Charmian Clift and George Johnston. His mother had pushed the Overton Window enormously to the left by writing a very popular column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* Women's Section and opposing in it the Vietnam War and the Colonels' Coup in Greece. Both parents were famous and fine writers. They had lived lengthily and very publicly in Greece and Martin was brought up there. When I met him, Martin had already been a cadet reporter on the *SMH*, and had a persona as his parent's even more left-wing, poetic son. He wrote a memorable program for ABC radio on the *Klephts*, fierce pre-Nineteenth Century Greek hillsmen who fought the Ottoman Empire, and that was clearly where his heart lay.

When I met him, both his parents were dead. Carl Harrison-Ford had sent me an enthusiastic review of my work Martin had written in a university newspaper, where he asked if it were illegal for a poet to think, placing me on the same 'shelf' as John Tranter, and declaring 'Jennifer Maiden, I love you, whoever you are...'. I took

this statement to mean he thought I was writing under a pseudonym (a lot of people did then), but I suspect it was a source of embarrassment to him when I turned out to be real, female and about a year younger than he was. We were both at a meeting of the Poetry Society (my first) and he unexpectedly nominated me for an office in it. I didn't win. At that point, he was part of the movement that championed experimental art over representational (writing in one review: 'if you want to communicate, use a telephone') but there were always qualifications to that if an artist's movement towards clarity or simplicity involved an improvement in quality or a refreshing of direction. I remember him telling me eagerly how Borges' final writings had left the labyrinths and returned to the simple plots and settings of the Argentinian countryside. Borge's complexities tended to support and be supported by the right-wing, of course, and that may have been a factor in Johnston welcoming the change.

My second memory of meeting him is that we were both sitting on a carpet (which had been borrowed from David Malouf) at the Tranters' house. He offered me a drink from his flask, which someone had given him at a party, and which he thought contained a mixture of alcoholic spirits. This confirmed for me his recklessness regarding alcohol, as I had already heard several stories about him being alcoholic, even though he was only twenty two. He was forty two when he died of alcoholism, beloved by his family and friends, and having produced some admirable and unique works of poetry and prose, and some brilliant translations of unlikely foreign movies for SBS. I remember hearing an idea among his friends that they thought it would have been better if his intellect and talent had found what they considered a more suitable setting overseas, and he did spend some time in post-Colonels Greece, but there really didn't seem any home for him but Australia. Despite his deep grief for his parents, and, therefore, his internalising their addiction, it seems to me that there is a basic political element in his destruction. He died in 1990, when the right-wing power structures had taken some pains to convince society that political art was obsolete, the Vietnam War was long over, and that they had no intention of unleashing the decades of invasion, colonialism and chaos they were already planning for the following year. There were always inklings, though, smaller exercises in power and international plunder. And among artists there was a subliminal defeated unease, apparently

without meaning. It was hard then to connect the impending lethal macrocosm to the personal malaise. That sort of mystifying and frustrating artistic and political confinement would have destroyed a man with the heart of a *Klepht*, lengthily and insidiously.

Selfishly, I regret that he died before my more explicitly political volumes of prose and poetry, starting with *Acoustic Shadow* were published. I think he would have much liked them, as Forbes did.

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Jennifer Maiden's full essay, **The Cuckold and the Vampires**, is available here <https://quemarpress.weebly.com/books.html>