

Martin and me

I'm writing this for people who didn't know Martin.

Those who did have their own memories, mine always begin with a smile and lead to at least another dozen good laughs for the times we had together.

"a lovely, funny man and I still miss him very much"

was how Spike Milligan described Peter Sellers and I feel the same way about Martin Johnston.

I met good friends at uni but was closer to Martin because of poetry. I wrote a poem, Martin saw something good in it and my life changed for the better.

Martin was an inspiration, he was what I'd hoped university was going to be a about and he knew so much stuff and was a pleasure to be with and he was a great writer. And he loved what other people did when they did it well.

He should have been a faculty. He was an innovation centre.

And we had some very funny moments through a rough time in our lives.

Photos show what he looked like but you have to add generous, long-winded in the most delightful way, never a cross word - he was kind and could leap surprisingly into a Greek dance or karate kick (weather permitting).

We met in 1969.

In 1970 we were both anti war and anti fascist.

On paper we had nothing in common and lots in common.

I was 20 and had barely read a book by comparison to Martin the walking encyclopedia

He was from Mosman via Hydra and I was from St Peters via Revesby. But we both had neglected teeth, didn't eat fish.

We liked each other and then we loved each other. And both needed some company.

Martin and I shared a house for 18 months and a friendship that never ended. We met through Brian Freeman who edited the Union Recorder and it was Brian that mentioned Martin needed a place to share and that he was not in good shape.

I don't remember the first meeting about the house but it soon meant the Forest Lodge and a drink and a song and talking writing and reading.

184 St John's Road Glebe was a corner shop converted - 2 garrets downstairs and a tasteful rendezvous pad for Steve Hooper the leaseholder, upstairs.

The only furnishing was a mattress each and a wall of books and a record player - predated on after many nights when the pub returned to the main room.

1970 I worked at Pabco - with Damien White over the holidays a malthoid factory - and food parcels came from Revesby sometimes but mostly - bolognaise a la Glebe and Potato scones With or without Tabasco.

We had reading nights, drinking nights and eating nights.

Mostly drinking.

It went with poetry

Music was of every sort- Brendan Behan sings his way through new York without his teeth - we both related.

'And the Old triangle' was a regular and favourite song

'Balham' by Peter Sellers

Jefferson Airplane and

Greek Clarino and flute

And Dancing as the weather warmed and we spread out into the parties. There were lectures and Martin was devouring books for reviews.

184 was a Centre of Excellence in literary appreciation and dubious housekeeping.

For a few months we had read-ins upstairs.

And then there was the politics.

The British Lion

The great sing off Christmas 71 - Glebe detectives in the upstairs beer garden singing "Michael row the boat ashore".

Downstairs - students and layabouts respond with "We're a pack of bastard, bastards are we"... A direction from upstairs to keep it down only increased the volume and there was a face-off. The 2 choirs met over the pool table and the publican was handing out jugs of beer - on the house - as tranquilisers. Music wasn't going to settle the crowd.

The pool game was high noon.

The students lost and retreated to 184 the one big room.

And we sang on indoors demolishing the cookware and providing a harvest of dead drinks and smokes for the next day's hangover.

Singing and drinking seemed a solution to most problems.

The Forest Lodge Singing became a regular part of any visit to the Forest lodge - beer garden - We were the Foaming Mouth Five (less two).

Andrew Huntley brought Elizabethan rounds to the repertoire "My dame has a lame tame crane"

Martin added "We three soldiers be"

And I added "The springtime brings on the shearing" and a lagerphone. The odd couple plus one.

Schooners of Old with a dash of lime, sarsparilla or cloves.

In some ways we were a trio overcoming sadness.

(Martin's trumped our pains but we sang instead of talking - I now see it was a ritual just like ordinary people's sharing the grief through laughter and tears - It was like a 2 yr wake.)

But we were all writing up a storm.

Andrew Huntley was working on his 'Paen to Sweat Poesy' - and Martin was as enthusiastic as ever - He loved other people's

work (see 'Essay on Criticism' - Andrew Huntley.) Everyone who wrote loved him for it.

And always new songs. We ran out of puff before we ran out of material...

I was also printing our three books- operating the offset for Arts Society- Ivor Indyk and Steve Hooper were the publishers.

And then there were the politics.

Most readings were a flask of rum for nerves

At Carslaw lecture theatre it was a full house we read poems and Declan Affley sang "The crow on the cradle".

Back at 184 the reading nights were the beginning of my learning to cook for 20... and a literary epiphany

Mid week - bring ten poems or pieces of writing to share.

It was a mini free U upstairs in the "rendevouz pad"

Martin read - Christopher Smart, David Campbell, Yeats - selections that were as new to me as Winnie the pooh which I'd only read the year before and I realised there was something to writing.

Because of Martin's enthusiasm and knowledge a conversation could be spanning a thousand years of people trying to find the right way of expressing themselves ...

By the end of 1971 my uni work had become overwhelming -I was barely keeping up. I'd transferred to an honours strand and had to do extra units. Friends helped with essays, Ivor Indyk dictated essay points over the phone at the Forest Lodge the night before my American Literature exam - It was exhilarating (a word I've never used before) and my best work at uni was done on Christopher Smart thanks to Martin's introduction. Only two people in the world had written about Christopher Smart at that time - obscure, brilliant and neglected and Martin knew his stuff. Martin shared his love of writers and he read it as it was meant. He was a wonderful orator.

Then Brian Freeman introduced Martin and me to David Campbell and I started on my thesis on his work. I'd also started driving a removals truck full time. I had to leave Glebe and the world of song for a while at least.

The honours year and Teachers College and then teaching took me away from the inner city for a while.

I'd taken up canoeing and bushwalking. Martin sent me a shepherd's crook from Crete delivered to Enmore by John Forbes.

I still have it of course.

In 1983 I moved to another country (New England) and things became more distant.

By the time I was mobile again, he was gone.

The last time I remember seeing Martin was with Roseanne and Vivienne and I remember how loving he was.

A poem was a way to make a friend

Yasou Levendi

Of the 20 Greek words I know

we used to shout these two a lot

it's bigger than kalimera

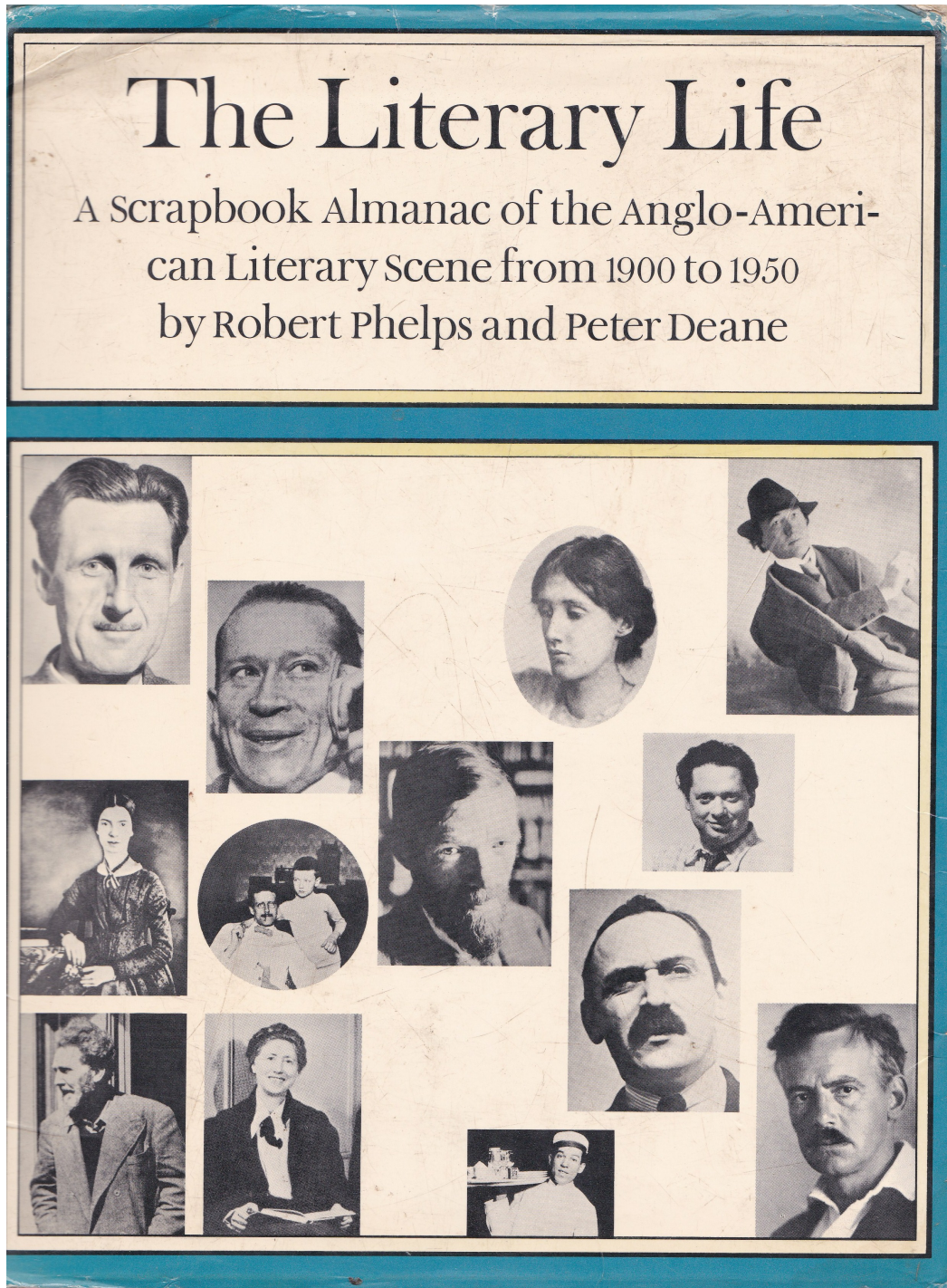
as a greeting, it celebrates honesty and integrity and the offer of a good time... which describes Martin and his work.

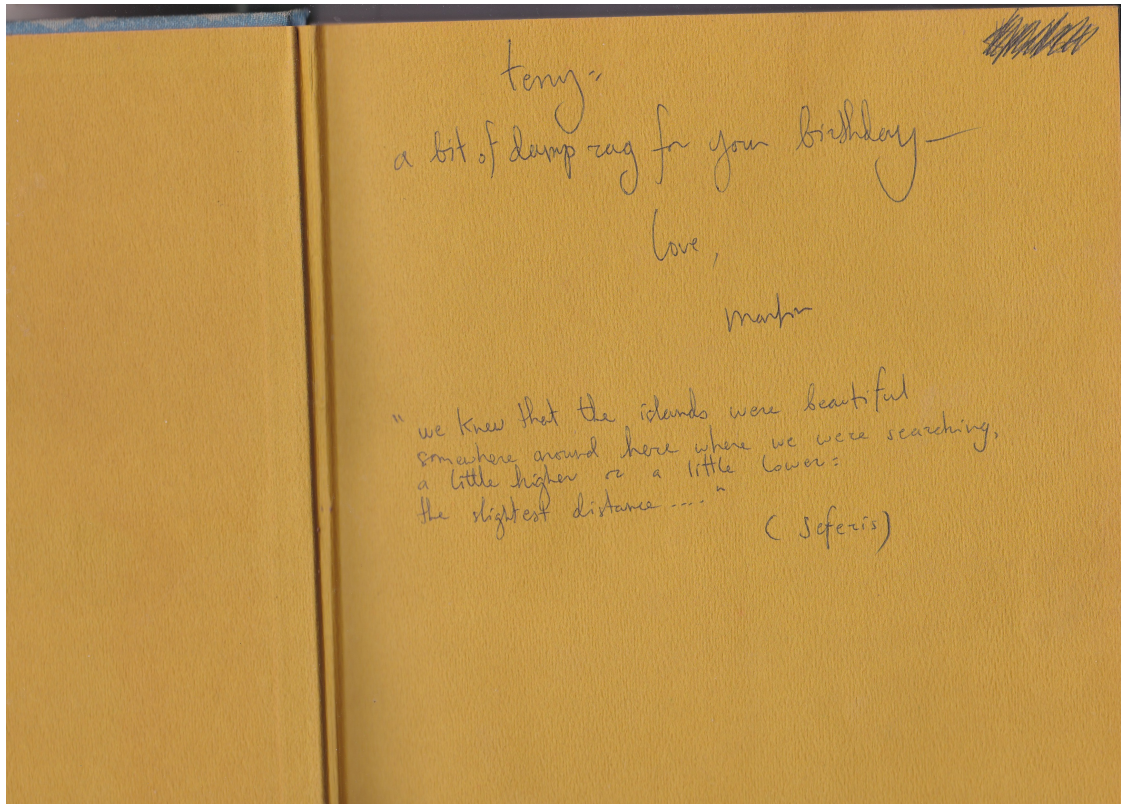
More than - welcome

More like - Cop this

Terry Larsen

Marin gave Terry this book, with its moving dedication, for his birthday





Terry and a friend singing at the SRC.

