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1.

Bridges Across Time

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The appeal of the diary rests in part on its promised exposure of the private and secret, but also, if not primarily, on the way in which it creates and recreates experience through the melding of the internal and external, the crossing of temporal boundaries, and the evocation of the actual physical person producing a material object as he or she writes.¹

A cornucopia of Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s personal journals are held in the Special Collections of the Baillieu library at the University of Melbourne. The journals, themselves, are a hodgepodge of sizes and colours: some hardcover; others cloth; an odd assortment of old exercise books; pocket books; art journals; sketch pads and even a notebook that once belonged to Josh, his youngest son. They are filled with ruminations on everything from national and international conferences and poetry readings to New Year’s Eve parties; ideas for poems; drafts of poems; quotes from writers, scholars and intellectuals; lists; drawings; photographs; cards; newspaper clippings and recounted dreams.

Most entries are handwritten in squiggly writing that becomes spikier over time. Biro, pencil and felt pen are all represented in the pages of the journals with many entries overlapping and even some details on small columns of paper stuck onto the pages of the journal,
suggesting thoughts scribbled on the run and added to the journal later, in an effort to create some kind of continuous record or narrative.

As blogs, online journals and even video diaries replace the more traditional handwritten journals, readers may—one day—lose access to writers’ handwriting. And while it may be a Romantic response to discuss any kind of emotional attachment to handwriting or mourn the disappearance of the handwritten word, typed journal entries and musings do not have the same raw, unedited quality. The palimpsests, scribbles, cramped marginalia and the long arrows directing readers to read one paragraph before another will vanish; computers allow for easy editing. The ability to delete, cut and paste without leaving behind the trace of any original thought is the antithesis of the handwritten journal where all is laid bare. Indeed, reading drafts of poems, stories and novels will be a far more sterile process. While it may be possible to compare typed drafts and glean the changes from one to the next, some draft versions will be lost. The overscoring, different combinations of word choices and problematic sections will be easily erased. This leads to the possibility of retrospective journal editing where the writer may go back over entries with a kind of self-imposing censorship. In a handwritten diary, a page might be torn out, but the evidence of it having existed remains. On a computer, a writer can return to anything and delete it effortlessly, as if it never existed. In this way, something spicy or controversial—initially written in the heat of the moment—may be tempered or deleted when the moment has passed.

Chris’s journals contain an interesting mix of handwritten and typed entries. I’m most interested in the handwritten entries with their spots of rogue ink and occasional smudges. In fact, all of the entries I chose for this book are handwritten. I think this is because they are somehow more representative of the hand that penned them. Chris’s entries reanimate his experiences for the reader, they bridge the gap between now and then. At various points I am ‘with him’ at Separation ‘Sep’ Creek or fired up for a poetry reading or just playing (and usually winning) a game of tennis or cricket. I inhabit his memories for the space of the journal entry and conjure the people, places and experiences in them. In one of his journals, Chris states:
When I turn to my diary I am trapped by the genre called ‘Diary’ and forget the imaginative, creative, fresh things I was going to write.²

The difference between diaries and journals is important. As William Gass has defined, a diary ‘should be filled with facts, with jots, with jogs to the memory’, while in a journal, ‘facts diminish in importance and are replaced by emotions, musings, thoughts’.³ While Chris may feel ‘trapped’ relaying the more factual elements of the diary, he revels in creating the more contemplative features of journal entries. Indeed, it is interesting to find the number of entries that are reworked and repeated in more than one journal. A fragment of an idea, handwritten in a 2010 journal, appears again, typed and lengthier in 2011. It demonstrates the way in which Chris uses his journals in his writing process; he revisits the entries and reworks some of their content. The use of repetition, weaving his journals together like a fugue, is fascinating.

Indeed, the repetition of certain dreamscapes and dreaming in these journals is frequent and often feeds the imagery of his poems. It is as if by writing his dreams down and pinning them to the page, he has triumphed over their transience. Ralph Waldo Emerson once stated, ‘Dreams are jealous of being remembered; they dissipate instantly and angrily if you try to hold them⁴, yet in Chris’s journals, dream after dream is recorded faithfully in between the meetings, holidays and flotsam and jetsam of life. He catches dreams in his memory net and pins them like a butterfly’s wings to the page. There is a page in one of the journals from 2011 entitled, ‘An Alphabet of Dreams’. In it, he runs through the alphabet starting with this:

My waking to the abrupt name, Ann Spudvilas.
Blue plagues and their welcoming eloquence.
Carrot cake deluxe’.

It ends, ‘Z’s are the rich fodder of our dreams’. It reminds me of his ‘Ode to Morpheus’: ‘Fiddling the hints …/sheedling the woollen flump … then, zzzz …’ Similarly, other journals demonstrate the
rich fodder of his dreaming, from the sublime to the banal and the sometimes ridiculous:

9/8: ‘I think God understands more things than he is given credit for.’ And a long dream about a comfortable house where an extended family were staying, sleeping, or changing to go to the beach. I think I was looking for somewhere to change, inter alia.

11/8: Dreamed of mathematics.

2008: Are there commas in our dreams?

Easter day: A very large dream indeed, largely in colour, a little after dawn. I was to meet someone, L perhaps, in a coffee lounge in Lygon Street, but first I had to pick something up from University House.

31/8: I confronted my Poetry class and prepared to give them back their poems, but no folder I opened was right. (Really just the classic teaching-anxiety dream, this week being devilish heavy.)

22/10: Dreamed of French theorists’ picnic. And then of large, vivid orange jellybeans.

2/7/07: I was shaving in a park when along came a fairly genial policeman to tell me that I was not allowed to shave there. After a little polite discussion, I proposed to carry on, further down the park, beyond a summerhouse, or shed, that was there. This seemed to be OK.

And yet, many of Chris’s poems reveal resentment that we ‘spill so much of our time rocking away in [Morpheus’s] arms’. Perhaps it is that he recognises, like Shakespeare, that ‘sleep [is] death’s counterfeit.’ Or that ‘While Half Asleep’ ‘the muse of memory
takes no hostages’ and the ‘senior moment’ is akin to being in the dark. However, ‘The Dream Injunctions’ is a rollicking dream poem, where lines such as the wonderful ‘there are no coyotes east of Boston’ are taken from an array of journals and juxtaposed with impeccable comic timing:

You can’t get up by canvas: it’s all a matter of glitz.
One can say, not tonight, pineapple.
It all takes place because of some geographical fault.
I think God understands more things than he is given credit for.8

And it is this comedy and fierce wit that makes reading Chris’s journals both wonderful and slightly uncomfortable. This is because, despite some of the journal entries being typed, most of the biting wit has not been moderated or deleted. In fact, this may be because many of the more contentious statements are handwritten. Chris’s journals are full of people; his entries reminded us of how the personal is political.

So, let me warn, or perhaps excite you: if you are Chris’s friend or have been his colleague, you will be in his journals somewhere—it may just take tenacity and commitment to reading the entries and occasionally deciphering the initials. He mostly uses initials for those who appear repeatedly throughout his journals: ‘K’ for Kristin; ‘PDS’ for Peter Steele; ‘PP’ for Peter Porter etc. And very occasionally you might not like what you read. Chris’s wit might sharpen itself on one of the occasions you attended or on a paper you gave or conversation you had. But you will be in his journals, perhaps you are here, in the smattering of people and events I have assembled from some of my journal reading:

Paul and Tina’s regular departure dinner, or Descendentalist dinner; To Toorak with a remarkably fit Jacob; The poetry group at Lisa’s; Opening of K’s exhibition; Patrick was back in town, resplendent in pink jacket and striped shirt; PDS called from Georgetown. I’ve been missing him greatly: we talked of
Harvard, of publication, of his poems, of his mum; Back from Britain, an impromptu lunch with DB; Great emails from Ian about brain experiments; Fiftieth wedding anniversary of Brian and Gerie; PP’s worsening condition; Over Dora Pamphlet’s fresh mounded grave; Dined with Lisa, Sarah Day, Jordie and Simon West; Hyperbole lunch with Tommaso; A new grandson arrives; Merry call from Josh at Beauty Point;

Talking with Boffles; Jenny and Peter Rose called in so that we dined garrulously. We read poems, Peter, ‘As I walked out one evening’; Jackey’s letter from Norfolk; Sep Creek; Seamus feels a long way from Harvard by now; ‘Possum Divine’; On then to Kate’s; New Year’s Eve at Stephanie’s; ‘A jaunt for Georgia’; By the end of the week I will have launched no less than 3 books: Gary K’s, Peter Goldsworthy’s and Doris’; Burnses and Hermi over; Today it is eleven years since Ben died; To Littles and Graham Duncan; Forbes called in and was blithely insolent; Lunching with the philosophers; Dinner at Jenny’s; Mary Jo Salter flew in from Paris; At dinner an uproarious conversation with Emma and Toby about words like ‘miaow’.

I have designed this book in the tradition of Chris’s journals and encouraged edgy juxtapositions of poems, musings, memoirs, essays, artwork and photographs. While each contribution is thematically linked, I have deliberately avoided creating individual sections or separate modules for essays, poetry, photographs and artwork because the journals contain more intricate webs of connections and parallelisms. In this way I have embraced Chris’s own thoughts about spontaneity and modelled the book on a journey:

When you read a journey against the grain, in polar opposition to diary entries and to the common surfaces of memory, what happens? The question is not simple. Certainly one cannot tap what Proust called In memoire involontaire by procedural decisions, nor by any acts of will. Yet there are ways to lay yourself open to some kinds of free association. Jump
from some randomly triggered detail, for instance. Try to be truly accidental, jaggedly spontaneous.

I have tried to retain the cadence of each writer’s ‘voice’. For this reason, I chose to keep the idiosyncrasies in each piece and the unique syntax of each writer, rather than smoothing the essays and poems into something more homogenous. It is, after all, a collection of essays and poems, not a biography, and therefore it is important to celebrate each contributor’s approach in his/her discussion of Chris’s life, work and poetry. I prize the way in which some writers are adjectival in their approach and others are spare. This also explains why I have retained the derivative of Chris’s name that each contributor prioritises. In some cases, there is the more formal ‘Wallace-Crabbe’, other times it is ‘Chris’, while Patrick McCaughey preferred ‘C.W-C’.

The contributions in this book were all commissioned. It was a difficult task deciding whom to approach and a small committee, consisting of David McCooey, Kristin Headlam, Lisa Gorton, Stephanie Trigg and myself, began with a longlist of about 70 people. We were only able to scale back by deciding on themes and then matching these themes to the people we thought would be most experienced and invested in writing on these topics. We also tried to contact different people from those who spoke at the Chris Wallace-Crabbe symposium in August 2013. However, we felt after seeing the first draft of the book that Philip Harvey’s, Ellen Koshland’s and Will Eaves’ presentations from this event would add an important series of readings to the book. They have formalised their essays for publication here.

Writers and poets were given broad topics on which to base their contributions, encouraging them to interpret and respond to the brief in their own personal way. This was to try and avoid repetitions in approaches or subject matter. For example, some contributors were asked to write an essay on poetic language in Chris’s poetry, others were asked to write an essay on visual arts and their presence in Chris’s life and career, and more still were asked to write a memoir detailing any aspect of life with regard to Chris’s career and work.
The contributors, equally, had carte blanche in creating a poem on the poet’s eightieth birthday. They have taken a range of approaches in their poetry, with some poems specifically about Chris and shared times with him, others thematically concerned with the concepts of time passing, and a many on the spaces and places reminiscent of him.

Interestingly, many scholars explore what they see as Chris’s belief system in his poetry: Paul Kane on the descendentals and his identification of the poet as ‘prankster’ poet offers pithy arguments about the sacred in Chris’s poetry; Jennifer Strauss’s splendid essay identifies Chris as an ‘urbane’ poet and celebrates the ‘abundantly secular’ in his poetry; Philip Harvey, with the two wonderful ‘addenda’ to his essay on Separation Creek, provides an examination of human existence in the context of Good Friday seder; Will Eaves reads Chris’s ‘Amphibious’ and discusses, among other astute interpretations, the Miltonic notes in this poem, and Lyn McCredden investigates the ‘double visioned playing’ in Chris’s poems forming, in her words, ‘his incarnational (anti-) theology’.

On a more personal note, Robin Wallace-Crabbe narrates a colourful series of vignettes about their childhood in Beauview Parade and Chris, himself, discusses his ancestors via the gravestone in St Vigeans churchyard and ending with his pleasure in recovering links with his British family. Alastair Niven’s thoughtful anecdotes about his friendship with Chris, and Angela Smith’s exploration of prosopopoeias in his poetry are intimate essays demonstrating the authors’ playful incisiveness in discussing his life and work.

Graeme Davison and Kate Darian-Smith explore Australian identity and institution in their essays on Chris at Harvard and the University of Melbourne, respectively, while Kevin Hart in his ‘Scruffy Sonnets’ discusses, among many other things (including the wonderful ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ poetic styles), the way in which ‘Australia has given Chris the “psychic space” and “aromatic blue air” he needs’.

Finally, Patrick McCaughey discusses Chris as ‘artist’ and the important fraternisation of poets and painters. This is further explored in Kristin Headlam’s powerful artwork on The Universe Looks Down where the bespectacled artist muses on the questing
aspect of this long poem. Chris’s own essay, ‘The Universe Cranks Up’, is a playful and personal essay on his complex poem.

It is in the poetry that we see two significant poets and dear friends of Chris’s who have since passed away. Peter Steele who often ‘enjoyed a small super special in Papa Gino’s pizza house’ with Chris gave permission for his eponymous poem ‘Montaigne’, with its haunting opening line, ‘I have taken to dreaming of you in the tower’ to be used in this book. Seamus Heaney’s poem, ‘A Section’, may well have been one of the last he wrote before his death in August 2013. Its evocation of Queensland and the section of sugar cane, highlights ‘old faithfuls in full cry/staggering out of time,/rampaging to the back-/echo of adze and mattock’. In his tribute to Seamus, Chris said ‘his friend was a poet who presented the way in which personal warmth could be a prime motivator in modern poetry. His combination of clarity and depth made him a great poet’.

David Malouf’s ‘Footloose, a Senior’s Moment’ and Lisa Gorton’s ‘Inscape’ are exquisite poems offering playful yet stark reminders of ageing and freedom, while Andrew Motion’s ‘Echidna’, David McCooey’s ‘Poem Ending with a Line Abandoned by Chris Wallace-Crabbe’ and Peter Goldsworthy’s ‘Freudian Homage’ all have witty connections to Chris and his poetry. Motion takes up an animal totem for Chris, McCooey uses a line about the ‘small hamster of desire’ that Chris once said he had never been able to use in a poem, and Goldsworthy discusses his own unconscious decision to give the protagonist in his novel, Maestro, two parents with the surnames Wallace and Crabbe. Kate Middleton in ‘Near Heidelberg’ reasserts the importance of art in Chris’s poetry while Peter Rose offers three new poems from his Catallan Rag as a tribute to Chris’s eightieth birthday.

Judith Bishop’s poem ‘Gifts for his Eightieth Birthday’ is a celebration of important influences and inspirations for Chris, from Keats to Dante Alighieri, and Sarah Day’s poem ‘New Year’s Eve’ prioritises time in a very Dickinsonian exploration of ‘our centrifugal journey round the sun’. Evan Jones gave permission for his very beautiful ‘Autumnal Poem for Chris’ to be reproduced in this book, and Michael Hofmann’s ‘Judith Wright Arts Centre’ is a jubilant
poem that Hofmann believed Chris would like for ‘the sort-of-sociological-Auden in it’.

Many of the contributors to this book communicated their surprise that when they went to undertake research for their piece, there were not more articles on Chris’s life and poetry in circulation. While there are a few excellent articles scattered across journals and books, there are not as many as there should be, given Chris’s prominence in Australian poetry and culture. I hope that this book might be a stepping stone for another series of articles or even a book or two on Chris Wallace-Crabbe.

To give the poet himself the last word:

The trouble with any discussion of poets and belief lies in the stubborn fact that their prime belief is in poetry itself. Poetics precedes ethics. When W.H. Auden asserted that he believed in the Oxford English Dictionary, he was obliquely making the same claim, that he worshipped language and its creative possibilities. To believe in poetry is to believe that one’s creative arts constitute a godhead. The religion of art is deeply heretical. Just as late Mediaeval Christians could believe both in a flat and in a spherical world, so poets as verbal mechanics believe in beautiful, linguistic artefacts as citizens believe in the Christian God, or the A.L.P., or animal rights, or academic humanism. On some mornings one wakes as a lyric poet, on others as a loving father, and that’s the way of it. (cf. Gwen Harwood on the play of possible selves). One makes contraptions, the other—Auden would suggest, indeed—inhabits them: rather as souls have been supposed to inhabit bodies, the habitation not being strictly spatial. 10