

Peter Cochran: Memorial

‘The great enemy of clear language,’ said Orwell, ‘is insincerity’. Peter Cochran was ironic, provocative, theatrical, but through his criticism—and career—runs a vein of honesty. He had a long, varied career, spanning acting, directing, teaching and prolific scholarship, but Peter was not a careerist. In fact, he often associated *ists* and *isms* with opportunism merely (‘Romanticism’ for one—see his “*Romanticism*”—and Byron; ‘Orientalism’ for another—see *Byron and Orientalism*). He once introduced Professor Michael O’Neill as ‘not a Marxist, Feminist, Postmodernist, Postcolonialist, but a LITERARY CRITIC’ (or words to that effect). Himself he called—boomingly—an ‘INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR’.

Peter’s memorial was held on October 10th, 2015, at Clare College, Cambridge, where he was an undergraduate and Footlight—and, indeed, one of the delights of the memorial was the requisition from a Cambridge library of Peter’s minutes to their meetings. Read aloud by fellow members, Pete Atkin and Richard Harris, it became clear that Peter found his style early: a deadpan economy, with which he recorded the fortunes of the chairman’s jacket or ‘Miss Greer’s’ curtain-weighting negligence.

That these skilled, meticulous minutes had lingered so long, and anonymously, in a Cambridge library seems typical of Peter, who apparently valued the unheralded at least as much as the illustrious. Whether tracing Byron’s relation to Hobhouse, translating Juliusz Slowacki’s *ottava rima* from the Polish (with marvellous ease, as co-translator, Mirka Modrzewska related), or trading erudite banter with Jack Wasserman, Peter immersed himself in the margins—though not the ‘niche’. He was evidently the same with people: a source of encouragement to outsiders and amateurs, as several former students recollected. Lydia Bakelmun spoke eloquently of Peter’s presence and influence as a teacher; Katharine Rabson Stark described his effect on her as an actress, singing ‘Feste’s Song’ in tribute (‘With hey, ho, the wind and the rain’).

And if Byron was—as Peter put it—the ‘fairy’ from the bottom of his garden, Shakespeare, perhaps, was the resident gnome. We heard from his former English teacher, Neil Salmon, of Peter’s persistence in putting on *Romeo and Juliet* with the neighbouring girls’ school. Jo Davies, who worked with him on *The Tempest*, recited from Caliban’s ‘Dream’. Peter had gone from Cambridge to the RSC and could cite—and perform—extensively from Shakespeare, as he did during the International Byron Conference, Epidauros, 2009, holding forth to the theatre with Macbeth and Richard. It is perhaps a regret that among Peter’s many books on Byron there is no ‘Byron and Shakespeare’ to place beside Wilson Knight’s.

The transition from the Bard to Byron was neatly captured in Jack Wasserman’s video tribute, in which he sang the Cochran/Wasserman collaboration ‘Brush Up Your Byron’, a reworking of *Kiss Me Kate*’s ‘Brush Up Your Shakespeare’. It was Byron, of course, that occupied much of Peter’s later scholarly life, and the memorial followed this trajectory. Among others, Jim

Tanfield read Peter's account of Byron's 'descent' into his life, via *The Vision of Judgment*; Christine Kenyon Jones gave an account of Peter's contribution to Byron studies; and Drummond Bone read from Hobhouse's Diary, suggesting that Peter's work on Byron and Hobhouse may be his most significant academic legacy. The afternoon culminated in a colourful performance of *The Vision of Judgment* itself, the poem which Peter styled Byron's 'best play', featuring Ken Robbie as St. Michael, David McClay as Satan, Ralph Lloyd Jones as Junius and Bernard Beatty as a sprightly narrator; and when the tumult dwindled to a calm, the applause for the cast became a warm applause for Peter.

He was a one off: actor, scholar, poet, mentor, compendium; irreverent, generous, punctilious, whimsical, difficult, cryptic, commanding; a man of range, whose memorial gathered a range of guests and talents. Among their many memories, however, one kept recurring: his voice. Honed, he said, on deaf relatives, it was appropriately rendered by his trademark *block caps*, and easily heard in his prose. Not a word of puff. You might differ with him on Byron, Hopkins, Chaplin, Fellini, Bush, Bugs Bunny, *et al*—and he accepted dissent with a sort of muttering good grace—but he called it like he saw it, without truckle or cant. It's possible that's what he saw in Byron, or the fairy saw in him.

Adieu, honest Peter. The isle is full of noises—but it don't boom like it used to.