

2014 Ray Mathew Lecture

Thomas Keneally *Gutenberg Fights On: A Survival Story*

Thursday 4 September 2014, 6pm

Theatre, National Library of Australia

The Ray Mathew Lecture commenced in 2009 as a major annual event for the National Library of Australia. It is named in honour of the Australian poet and playwright, Ray Mathew (1929–2002), who left Australia in the late 1960s, never to return. Mathew spent most of the remainder of his life—he died in 2002—living in the New York apartment of his patrons, Eva and Paul Kollsman. The Ray Mathew and Eva Kollsman Trust is a generous bequest, made to the Library by Eva Kollsman, to support and promote Australian writing.

In memorialising Ray Mathew, I thought of a documentary, already screened on the BBC and about to be seen on our ABC, on the famed Australian expatriates of the post-war era. Fronted by Booker prize winning Howard Jacobson, and entitled *Brilliant Creatures*, it examines the expatriate careers of Germaine Greer, Clive James, Barry Humphries and Robert Hughes, but could also have cast an eye in the direction of Zoe Caldwell, or on deceased writers, the dazzling poet Peter Porter, the author Randolph Stowe, that gifted Western Australian, on Sumner Locke Elliott, and of course Ray Mathew. There is a sub-group of expatriates to which Ray Mathew and Sumner Locke Elliot belonged, and about whom I have

had my attention recently riveted by Nigel Starck's marvellous biography of Russell Braddon, *Proud Australian Boy*. These are a group whose reasons for expatriation may have included, amongst all the other complex motives for leaving Australia, including the psychological, cultural, personal, economic and other reasons, lay the question of their homosexuality. It is not absolutely clear to what extent this provided partial motivation for Ray Mathew's leaving of Australia. But, in informal conversations, Sumner Locke Elliott, author of *Rusty Bugles*, *Careful He Might Hear You*, *Water Under the Bridge* and *Fairyland*, made it clear to me that his immigration to the United States in 1948, where he became a pioneering television drama writer, was to a notable extent due to Australia's small-community hostility to homosexuals.

In my fiftieth year as a writer and my seventy-eighth as an Australian citizen, I feel it appropriate to regret that our country's mean and full-throated trumpeting of its hatred of homosexuals drove some Australian artists to find shelter, not always successfully, elsewhere, and it strikes me that Ray Mathew may have needed to be here for his writing, rather as that un-cosy giant, Patrick White, needed his muselike but dismally envisaged Australia.

I mentioned the talented expatriate Russell Braddon earlier and met him occasionally at literary parties in London, and find his case, heartbreaking on a number of fronts when it comes to assessing the quality of our society in the period when Ray Mathew and other young Australians of talent contemplated the matter of expatriation I shall recount as characteristic of the time. Gunner Russell

Braddon, liberated POW of the Japanese, suffered from the trauma of rescue when in Darwin, returned to Australia after the peace in 1945, he saw the blood and sweat-stained pay books he had saved, to return them to families of the dead of the Thai-Burma railway, taken away from him and burned as unsuitable relics by the military authorities. On his return to the southeast of the country, he would joylessly attend Sydney University, and – as a former POW and a homosexual -- endured three years of depression and bewilderment. Like many other former POWs he had to accustom himself to not sleeping on floors and was plagued by recurrent malaria. He felt disengaged from the world, and even perhaps felt himself an internal exile because of his homosexuality. On the Burma railway he had been a sturdy and courageous presence and would be lovingly sketched by his lover of the time, the Englishman and cartoonist Norman Searle, whose life he was credited with saving who would become a famous cartoonist and creator of St Trinian's. But, as a student again, he disintegrated.

He attempted what was then the statutory crime of suicide. He took an overdose of pills but was found before they took his life. The results were punitive even by the standards of society then. He was transferred to the psychiatric wing of Concord Repatriation Hospital. Her found many of his fellow former prisoners stumbling through the corridors, and discovered that in spite of the public's respect for POWs, here they ran the risk of being treated as miscreants. .Those men who resisted the psychiatric regime were threatened with electro-convulsive therapy. Men suffering from war trauma and out of their mind, temporarily or

permanently, were thrown into padded cells where they would howl and yell, 'straitjacketed in their own filth'. An orderly asked Braddon to fellate him and threatened him that he would be put on the shock treatment list if he didn't comply. Braddon typically threatened to 'bite it off', and also informed a medical officer. Finally he signed a statutory declaration in which he undertook not to attempt suicide again.

His fellow former prisoner Syd Piddington, and Piddington's wife Lesley, had left for England and, arising through Piddington's practice of telepathy in Changi, after an impoverished beginning, embarked on a series of radio shows for the BBC, transmitting phrases and concepts into the mind of his wife and of other people.

Braddon spent all the money he had to get to London, in other words, to flee Australia, and his own arrival in 1949 put a third person in the Piddington operation. . Braddon's career with the Piddingtons would continue until he began a successful writing career, his first work being a biography of the Piddingtons, and his classic the 1951 account of his imprisonment, *The Naked Island*. He had survived by fiction and show biz and felt a greater latitude for his soul in Britain than in his own country.

The perceived restricted nature of Australian society operated strongly on most expatriates – they are frankly on-the-record on these matters. So did the postcolonial sense of cultural inferiority which was the mark of Australia when Ray Mathew left in 1960. It was, as with Braddon and most of the others, the English language's Mecca, London, to which Australian talent went first, willing to become

British as well as Australian cultural figures. As Howard Jacobsen's documentary illustrates, at that stage of history the most important success an Australian artist in any medium could have was a London success. Ray of course became the cherished companion of a New York couple, the Kollmans, who gave that gentle soul a family in new young where Ray felt he had at last 'grown up'. His sole novel, *The Joys of Possession*, was published in 1967, and he died in 2002.

So, *vale* Ray Mathew, who, driven by a range of motivations, including – I would argue – his sexuality, found his own tentative survival in New York.

This is the fiftieth year since I was first published. As a young writer star-stuck with figures like Mathew, poet and playwright, I met him at a Fellowship of Australian Writers event at a bookstore in Pitt Street, Sydney. I think Ray Mathew would not be adverse to my reflecting, in terms of that fifty years, from which I did not learn everything but must have learned something, on the place of the book, and above all the novel, in 1964 and 2014. Let me say that in the past fifty years I frequently heard the death of the Novel-As-We-Know-It proclaimed. Although it is a matter of debate, for many of us Marshall McLuhan seemed to predict the death of the book in a book entitled – what else? -- *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. 'The world of visual perspective,' he wrote, 'is one of unified and homogeneous space. Such a world is alien to the resonating diversity of human words. So language was the last art to accept the visual logic of Gutenberg technology, and the first to rebound in the electric age.' Modern states became possible, he told us, through the homogenising impact of the printing press, but his argument appeared to be that

now, in the electronic age, there would be a return to the tribalism and diversity which preceded movable type; a return to the village, except in this case a global village, one in which the non-tribal pursuit of individual excellence in writing or painting would give way to something more communal and exultant. Thus, basically, electronic media would kill the book.

There was no doubting the globalizing impact of television. So it was fashionable for us young writers confidently and with a trace almost of tragic pride to predict the death of the Gutenberg book. And it was also said by people, on a more understandable level, that if television didn't kill the book for Marshall McLuhan's reasons, it would kill it through the more obvious one that in providing us with new and ample narratives it would utterly replace the book. It proved, though, that the two mediums sang to different parts of the soul, and in the end that one could leave three hours of television viewing and still hanker for the imponderable rewards of the printed book.

So, the contrast!

In 1964 the term 'Australian culture' or 'Australian writing' would have provided the young Barry Humphries with a one line gag on a London stage.

The Australian Society of Authors had just been founded but has little visibility.

No visibility for Oz writing. No festivals. Our literature was lumped, with that of New Zealand, the West Indies, Canada, India and South Africa, into the category

of Commonwealth Literature, as if the chief aspect of our writing was our general colonial and post-colonial condition, and not our particularity, our uniqueness,.

There was no Public or Educational Lending Right compensation for writers as there is now.

Little study of Australian writing in schools. And no visible profession of letters.

Last of all, there were no literary festivals where a young tyro novelist like the hapless Tom Keneally could go to hear leading writers tell us that writing fiction was an impossible, modest feast and severe famine way to earn a living.

In 2014: the ASA and Copyright Agency Limited exist effectively; the ASA produced a minimum conditions contract to which publishers agreed; a system of Public Lending Right and Educational Lending Right exists – in this the exertions of Colin Simpson and Frank Moorhouse were crucial, and I particularly admire the energy Frank put into the fight. There is mass-photocopying compensation. There is a visible publishing industry surviving on the 21-day Territorial Copyright clause of our Copyright Law; and there festivals coast to coast, writers with profiles as citizens, and a highly recognised craft of letters.

But why has the Gutenberg book survived? Why does it seem to us to be approaching balance with the e-book? No guarantees exist, but for now our love of the tactile remains, our taste for the physical. Even young, tech-savvy writers see the trade, printed book as their first option, with the straight-to-electronic option existing chiefly as a fall-back, despite its economic equities and

theoretically limitless possibilities. There are many examples of remnant institutions which should have been killed by technology, except for own animal nature and tribal enthusiasms. These include: live opera; live sport, cineplexes, physical university campuses; and the print book.

Writing as an experience is, as it was in the early 1960s, the same exercise as ever, and I am increasingly fascinated in the way the conscious and unconscious brain combine to produce the novel, good or bad. One is not far into writing a book before one knows that the major linkages of structure, imagery, character and events will be provided from the part of the brain that lies beyond conscious knowing. That part of the brain is, I feel, uniquely engaged in writing. The conscious mind gives a work its elegance and sense of knowing. The unconscious supplies its human authenticity, daring and multiplicity of grace notes, revelations and epiphanies. But this equation accounts for the anxiety about the chance of completion and cohesion of the book which plagues the best of writers during the process.

So nothing has changed for the writer. The book is the same reckless act of trust, infatuation, recklessness, narcissism, near-crippling doubt, delight and a sense of the elements being beyond one's control, as it was in the summer of 1962-3, when Ray was writing in London, and I wrote my first, flawed novel in a bedroom shared with my medical student brother in unglamorous Homebush.

All changes, and all remains the same.

Ray Mathew lived with this bewilderment and questing, and so do we all,
whatever changes overcome the business of publishing.