

## ROBERT HANDICOTT

### KEEP IN YOUR HEART A GREEN BOUGH A NOTE ON MARTIN HALEY (1905-1980)

The late Martin Haley was very kind to me, and I remember him with considerable affection. We never met, and we corresponded only during the last two years of his life; yet I think of him as a friend, and am sure he thought of me in the same way. Only since his death have I discovered how many other people shared and valued a similar relationship with him.

My first encounter with the name occurred in 1971. I was a Uni. student who had just begun to write poems, and Graeme Curtis had talked me into subscribing to *Makar*, "The Literary Magazine of the University of Queensland", of which he was then business manager. In the first issue that arrived I read a review by Viv. Duus of *Chung Hua: The Central Splendour*, "An Anthology from the Chinese Versified by Martin Haley". The review was brief and tepid: "A number of the poems are successes, both as translations and as poems". Mr Haley, it emerged, had adopted the unfashionable approach of translating into conventional English verse forms, and he seemed "regularly guilty of the metrical translator's original sin: the slight perversion of sense or addition of words not in the original in order to round out the metre".

Approximately a year later I discovered that the University Bookshop still had copies of Cecil Hadgraft's *Queensland and Its Writers*, 1000 copies of which had been printed for the state centenary in 1959. Martin Haley – who was evidently not a young man – rated a page in this compact volume, having issued "not far short of a dozen thin books of verse". His strong point, I learned, was the short epigram; his favourite model, the Roman poet Martial. "He has an occasional power to get below the surface, and then a little piece of four lines is a whole comment on our society," Mr Hadgraft wrote. "His polish and deftness are things rare enough to be valued." He was also, I might have noted, "very much a member of his religious persuasion".

The late 70's saw a small explosion in the number of outlets for poetry in Queensland. This renaissance was particularly opportune for me, because it coincided with my first serious attempts at seeking publication. In each of the new magazines, moreover, I found work by Martin Haley. He must certainly have been the most senior contributor to most of them. A translation from Cavafy appeared in the first *Border Issue*; selections of epigrams appeared in early issues of *Image*; and prose as well as verse appeared in Les Alcorn's *Phoenix-Australia*. Martin, who had brought out his *Poems with a Preface* as far back as 1936, was ever grateful for opportunities to stay, as he saw it, "on the literary map".

Then in August '78 I learned that he edited a magazine of his own. It was called *Vista*, and it operated, reportedly, "on a shoestring". As quickly as I could I found the address in a Brisbane telephone directory (it was well known that Martin Haley lived in Paddington) and sent him three poems on spec. Within a fortnight I received a small parcel. It contained an acceptance note in a strong, distinctive script, and an inscribed copy of *Chung Hua: The Central Splendour*, "a booklet of mine that may please".

*Vista*, as it happened, was dire. A typical monthly issue consisted of seven quarto sheets — pink, orange, or white — duplicated both sides and stapled in the top left-hand corner. The layout was cluttered, and typing errors abounded (in one of my poems the word "sceptics" was printed as "septics"). *Vista* was — and is — the magazine of the Catholic Readers' and Writers' Society. (It has since become a quarterly, and presentation has considerably improved.) Poetry made up about half of the contents, the other half consisting of papal pronouncements, book reviews, occasional articles, and comments on world affairs, the latter reflecting the position of the National Civic Council. Such poetry as there was tended to be on religious themes. Most of it was ordinary, and some pieces were plagiarized; but there was also the occasional poem by Margaret Diesendorf and, before my time, by James McAuley. Poems published in *Vista* are catalogued by the Fryer Memorial Library.

Martin's letters were full of encouragement and sound advice based on experience. They were always lively, but were often tinged with a stoical sadness: there was no getting away from "the machinations of the printer's devil", the humbug that rules the world, or growing old with a failing heart. He always signed off with "Pax Domini", however; and inevitably included an epigram or two, the most memorable of which, perhaps, was entitled *To Shapcott*:

Your book-balloon shoots straight up on high  
With less in it than meets the eye;  
Its substance is, of course, thin-skinned,  
And holds but gas and gastric wind.

It is only fair to add that, when tackled about this, Martin did allow Shapcott some credit for his earlier work. Maintaining that "no satirist ever yet wrote on oath", he suggested that the quatrain might have been applied equally to any number of other modern poets. "He (Shapcott) has been part of that sharp decline from FitzGerald, McAuley, Stewart and Hope which is a feature now of the Australian literary firmament."

Shortly after Martin's death, his long-time friend Gordon Hale, then president of the Fellowship of Australian Writers in Queensland, wrote an article published in the Silver Jubilee issue of *Scope* (the FAW[Q] newsletter) in which, among many other things, he states: "In every kind of writing, prose and poetry, Martin imposed upon himself the strictest discipline. He was a perfectionist. No critic could fault the conformation of any sonnet, triolet, rondeau, etc. penned by Martin". While no-one denies the author of an obituary the right to use a certain amount of hyperbole, Gordon Hale's claim, even if taken as applying only to the "conformation" of Martin's work, is not substantiated by a reading of his last poems – the poems, that is, which appeared in *Scope* and *Vista* during the period of our correspondence. A glance through Martin's earlier verse (that part of it held by the James Cook University Library) suggests that his rigorous perfectionism may always have been more legendary than real. The tempered criticisms of R. D. FitzGerald

in his preface to *The Central Splendour* are worth noting. FitzGerald is obviously sympathetic towards Martin's cause; but one feels as one reads his preface that he has been placed in a position not unlike that of the schoolteacher who is asked for a reference by a likeable but lacklustre pupil. He is obliged to mention an "occasional lack of 'finish'", "some disregard in his work for the final niceties of composition". "He is perhaps a little impatient of revision, a little disinclined to consider sufficiently that mutual sacrifice that matter must make to manner, and manner to matter, for the best possible results."

James McAuley, of course, in *A Map of Australian Verse* (1975), points directly at the weakness which flaws so much even of his friend's best-finished work (the lyrics which appeared in anthologies in the 1950's, for example): "the language is merely traditional rather than traditional-made-new, as is needed".

Surely, too, if an author must repeatedly resort to self-publication, bemoaning his lack of a "patron" (and lack of success in the Golden Casket) in the notes to many of his books, it may be begging the question for him to complain about the unwholesome "literary atmosphere" of his times. The literary circles which Martin was instrumental in forming and in which he chose to move — the FAW(Q) and the Catholic Readers' and Writers' Society — surrounded him with friends and respectful, likeminded admirers who provided a buffer against independent criticism — the external discipline of which, I would argue, is essential, if a sincere championing of unfashionable literary values is to be prevented from slipping into a kind of stubborn self-indulgence. "Undoubtedly he had become one of our most notable writers of this century," writes Gordon Hale for *Vista*. And the crucial word is "our". If it is permitted to expand in meaning beyond a specific reference to the FAW(Q) and the CRWS — as it may all too easily expand — then the statement becomes absurd. The speaker has taken too blinkered and myopic a view.

Re-reading Martin's letters and last poems, I get an image of a spritely elderly gentleman who goes very early every morning to the beach, but who keeps to the safety of the shallow

white water, well in from the breakers. I find myself wondering whether Martin ever really followed the advice he once gave me and “launched out into the deep” himself. That portion of his work I have been able to find suggests he may not often have done so. Undoubted successes, such as his response to the Inson portrait of David Campbell, published posthumously in *Poetry Australia*, and his prize poem in the 1979 Warana Writers’ competition (based, typically, on a remote historical incident), do not appear to represent the tip of an iceberg. It is difficult to believe (pace Gordon Hale) that Martin’s work will receive much attention from posterity, even from readers who share his faith or his love for the landscape he occasionally sketches (the Maroochy River, the Springbrook Falls, and so on). Some poems, no doubt, will live on for those who knew and loved the man. But after that?

Nor can I be optimistic about the future of Martin’s numerous translations. Although a couple of them have found their way into a school textbook (Flynn and Groom’s *This Life*, Pergamon, 1974), the majority are surely destined for the same quaint obscurity as Sir Samuel Griffith’s translation of *The Divine Comedy*. Martin seems to have believed that his translations were of special value because they were made in Queensland; but in the long run, unless a translation is a literary masterpiece in its own right – like the *Aeneid* of Gavin Douglas, or FitzGerald’s *Omar Khayyam* – the accuracy and accessibility of it are the things that are going to matter. As to accuracy, Martin was very candid about the liberties he took, especially with Greek and Chinese. “Accuracy hasn’t perturbed me unduly,” he writes in 1955. A translator with this attitude must draw a veil, if not a blanket, over his originals. Martin’s translations from Latin and French, the foreign languages he knew best, appear to deserve their description more justly; and his versions of the sonnets of Louise Labe receive high praise from A. D. Hope. But here the second decisive factor comes into play. Who, for example, is going to delve into the bowels of a university library to locate Martin Haley’s translation of an epigram by Martial, when he can pick up James Michie’s translation, in the Penguin Classics paperback, from any sizable

bookshop? Martin is not saved in this case by his creditable intention of producing translations that would give "delight". A reading of the Penguin translation of Martial IV 89 beside Martin's version (included, unexpectedly, at the end of *Thomas More as Poet*) shows at once that the local rendering is marred by archaism and by awkwardness of syntax. Few of the important works Martin translated are not now readily obtainable, edited more surely by professional hands; and the out-of-the-way works Martin commonly concerned himself with are unlikely ever to interest many readers.

Martin Haley's activity as a translator may be understood, it seems to me, as his solution to a personal crisis. The epigram, the "little piece of four lines", allowed him to please himself and get away most consistently with his shortcomings. The form came easily to his cast of mind; he was never short of opinions to express; and a first or second draft was often all that was required.

Your lyrics are delightful, Robert Herrick!  
But in your epigrams there's scarce a skerrick  
Of any wit. Alas, that no deft, dancy  
Rapier point flashed through your petalled Fancy.

(from *Good Measure*, 1951)

The epigram, however, was not enough for Martin Haley. Possessed by a deeply-felt need to put work through, yet lacking the powers of invention he admired in great writers of other times and tongues, he turned to those very writers for ready-made material on which to expend his energies. The results of his labours, a whole series of slim little pamphlets (he would have issued many more of them had the "patrons" been forthcoming), became his chief hope of recognition.

Those of us who knew Martin Haley, in one way or another, will always owe him a debt. Some part of our achievements, if any, will be traceable to his encouragement and good influence. His most important legacy, however, may well be his example of a life dedicated both to literature in the widest sense

and, more particularly, to the notion that writing is an activity worth devoting oneself to. In *The Central Splendour* there is an anonymous poem, translated as *Advice to a Poet*, which seems to express his philosophy perfectly:

Though cheerless the whole world seems now,  
Stripped bare, and numb and dumb,  
Keep in your heart a green bough:  
The singing bird will come.

Martin's muse may not often have sent him a "singing" bird; but the advice is admirable, and one can only respect a lifetime's heroic adherence to it.



Abraham's Exchange Hotel, Mareeba, N.Q. 1910