

## ELIZABETH PERKINS

### ADDISON AND STEELE AND OTHER GOOD METAJOURNALISTS — COLIN TALBOT'S *GREATEST HITS*

Colin Talbot, *Greatest Hits*. Wild & Woolley, Sydney, 1977. 237 pp. \$4.95.

It happened that on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, about the eleventh hour of the evening, I finished re-reading Colin Talbot's *Greatest Hits* and fell to musing on the considerable pleasures afforded to the reader of good Australian journalism. As I rummaged, there tumbled from the bookshelf a second-hand collection of Addison's *Tatler* essays, and the thought came that very likely the level-headed founder of English journalism, comprehending with eighteenth century comprehensiveness the changes in literary conventions between the reigns of Queens Anne and Elizabeth II, would have bestowed considerable approval on Mr Talbot.

Not that Mr Talbot doesn't write about sex and sexual morality when he has to, but he writes about it, sir, in such a way that it falls into perspective in the scheme of things and Mr Talbot seems aware that there are kinds of immorality which rot the fabric of society more relentlessly than the sexual preoccupations of persons. But let us not indulge in an orgy of moral denunciation. Enough of that is done up this way to blight a thousand hectares of sugar cane.

A friend of Colin Talbot recommends the warped syntax of his prose, but before I had read that bit I'd already noted in my musings: "Even Colin Talbot's most relaxed style is grammatically sound and when he uses the jargon appropriate to a topic the words carry intelligible information." And that is an unusual accomplishment of jargon these days. Perhaps you had better buy a copy of *Greatest Hits* and make your own decision.

*Greatest Hits* is a collection of stories written for Australian magazines and newspapers since 1972. The stories are stories of the kind a newspaper man goes out to find, not a structural unit of imaginative prose like Talbot's *Massive Road Trauma* (1975). But like *Massive Road Trauma*, a nicely presented publication by Outback Press, the stories in *Greatest Hits* have substance, originality, clarity, economy and shape. On the evidence of these thirty-four pieces Colin Talbot is one of our best journalists, and if more journalism were of this calibre he would not need to call his variety metajournalism.

The stories are packed with verifiable facts and the facts are interesting to anyone concerned with Australian society. Good journalism is always good sociology. If, like me, the reader cannot tell the difference between ABBA and the Skyhooks, the fifteen stories in *Rock 'n' Roll* and *When the Music's Over Turn Out the Lights* indicate that there might be some sociological gain in acquiring the ability. It is clear that parents who

do not know what their children enjoy as music will be unaware of some of the most influential components of their children's environment. I once took a squeal of children to a Rolling Stones concert, and although the experience was not very enjoyable, I learnt then something since forgotten but sharply recalled by Talbot's stories: popular music is not a sub-culture but is part of the whole culture of a country. Talbot's observations on pop people and their followers suggest that it is worth making the effort to understand them. Because of their prominence pop people are vulnerable to political machinations, and those concerned with what Australian politicians get up to in their scramble to retain their seats and other things will be interested to read "The Persecution and Deportation of Joe and his Travelling Band".

Irony and satire are important qualities in Talbot's work, and he is a very good mimic, but there is no sarcasm and no denunciation. He has opinions but they do not present themselves as prejudices. In *Massive Road Trauma* Talbot says he was born in the late forties. His work shows a steady and comprehensive philosophy acquired in under thirty years of living. Readers who really do like literature and who recognise that they live in the twentieth century and not the eighteenth will find in *Greatest Hits* the same liveliness of prose and clarity of position that they find in Addison, Swift, Defoe and Johnson.

The stories are presented in seven sections, beginning with Talbot's experiences on the hippie trail along the coast of California. These stories tell about the things Talbot saw — he does not seem to be the focus of his own writing. In the Preface he says that his journalism sometimes gives way to "fictive elements", but where the facts are not verifiable and he could be inventing, the fiction is all of a piece with the rest.

The writing does not make out a case for this, that or the other. It never instructs or advocates. If the reader thinks he understands something better after reading these stories it is not because they have persuaded him to Talbot's point of view. The reader may disagree and still feel the delights of learning. Talbot's "Killing Time Watching Death" is an addition to the descriptions of bull-fighting given by Ernest Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence, and it does not set out to persuade as does Hemingway's classic *Death in the Afternoon*.

The role of Talbot's irony is indicated by his title, "Killing Time Watching Death", and the title implies a philosophic stance, especially when it is set beside the decadent romanticism of Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* and the mawkish sentiment perceived in Hemingway's title after his account has been read.

The piece that most deserves serious attention is the story built around the narrative of a male nurse working in the Intensive Care ward of a large Melbourne Psychiatric hospital. There is no obscene morbidity, no Sunday Truth squeals of delicious outrage. It is simply a piece that provokes thought. One learns here what a massive road trauma is.

Someone recently presented a remarkable truism in *The British Jour-*

*nal of Aesthetics:*

Art effects change in two ways. It may give a message through its content, or it may hit us through the way it is put together.

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There is no specific message in Colin Talbot's *Greatest Hits* but the stories come down gently on the side of sanity. And they certainly hit us through the way they're put together.