Vale Bernard Hickey: Our Man in Venice

Friends of Bernard Hickey were saddened to hear that he passed away after a short illness in Lecce, Italy on 31 July this year. Bernard was a larger-than-life figure who worked for many years as honorary ambassador, or Consul, for Australian literature abroad, in Italy mainly, but also elsewhere in Europe. I met him back in the 70s, being introduced to him by Professor Ken Goodwin on one of the first of many visits Bernard made to The University of Queensland, including the Fryer Library. Born at Maryborough and having taught for two years at Meandu State School, Bernard left to study in London and in Dublin, graduating in arts from Trinity College in the latter city. On his way home he stopped off in Rome, where he completed a doctorate in literature on Patrick White and was at one time secretary to the legendary Mario Praz.

Bernard then decided to stay on in Italy where he took up his lifelong work devoted to teaching and to promoting in a variety of ways the study of Australian and commonwealth literature in Italy. He taught for many years as Associate Professor at Ca’ Foscari University, Venice, soon becoming identified with that city for his generous hospitality to visiting Australian academics and writers. He promoted Australian literature with imaginative zest and zeal. He was ebullient, idiosyncratic, exuding joie de vivre, one of the most generous people I have ever met. He became fluent in Italian – not only the language but the buoyant gestures – at times seeming to ‘out-Italian’ the Italians. Desmond O’Grady captured his Irish spirit by describing him as a leprechaun, a rather rotund but sprightly one. His passion for his role was as infectious as his activities were varied. He worked as translator and editor, published articles and books, organised conferences, readings and also special lectures among community groups as well as at the university. With the assistance of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, which appreciated his activities, he set up an Australian Writer’s Studio in Venice. It hosted many writers including Paul Sherman, Val Vallis and Lionel Fogarty, all from Bernard’s home state of Queensland. Later he helped to establish a writers’ studio in Rome named after the British poet, B. R. Whiting, by the latter’s wife, painter Lorri Whiting (sister of Malcolm Fraser) who works in that city. Bernard’s energy and enthusiasm appeared boundless, concealing the dedication behind it. He was a great traveller, often on the move, something of a Pimpernel in the way he could turn up out of the blue on flying visits around the world, trips packed with meetings and plans. I recall his asking me on a visit to Venice to look through the proofs of his book on the Australian short story, Lines of Implication. The local printer was disorganised, deadlines were pressing. We travelled in a vaporetto down the Grand Canal discussing the proofs – the only opportunity we seemed to get – as Bernard simultaneously offered me a running commentary on the crowded palazzi. He was an incomparable guide to the city he loved.

Bernard found it difficult coping with the academic bureaucracy in Venice and after many years moved to a position as Professor at the University of Lecce, the capital of Puglia, in the far south, just north of Otranto, south of Brindisi. Here he energetically built up a centre for Australian studies. Upon nominal retirement, last year Bernard’s plans for development attracted the sponsorship of Felice Montrone of Sydney for the establishing at Lecce of a Centre for Australian Studies in the Mediterranean. Bernard was to have been foundation Director. He donated his library of Australiana to the Centre, some 7,000 volumes. Truly it may be said of him: ‘We shall never see his like again’.

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