



Peter Neville Frederick Porter
(1929–2010)

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Peter Porter, who was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2002, died in London on 23 April 2010. Memorial services and celebrations of his life and work in Britain and Australia testify to the great affection, honour and respect felt in both countries for this eminent Australian-born poet, broadcaster and cultural commentator.

Peter Neville Frederick Porter was born in Brisbane on 16 February 1929 after his mother had suffered some five miscarriages. He was an only child. In a number of semi-autobiographical poems of his early childhood, Porter recalls a 'bright locked world' centred on a suburban Brisbane backyard where his father tended the garden and his more ebullient mother placed bets over the back fence with a neighbour who would transmit them to the local SP bookmaker. This version of an Australian Eden was cut short by his mother's sudden and unexpected death when Peter was nine years old. Thereafter, in the *roman fleuve* of Porter's recreated life, he was an emotional outcast.

Porter attended State School and then was a boarder at Church of England Grammar School ('Churchie') in Brisbane and Toowoomba Grammar School. In retrospect, his school years were a time of misery presided over by bastions of muscular Christianity and summed up in his satiric poem 'Mr Roberts': 'This pedagogue pushed: he owned them for four years. / A Rugby field was the Republic's mould'. The saving grace for Porter was English literature, especially Shakespeare, Tennyson and Browning. His first publications appeared in the *Toowoomba Grammar School Magazine* for 1945 and 1946 and he won several school prizes.

Ironically, in view of the many invitations Porter received to take up positions at universities later in life, he qualified but never studied at university. In Brisbane, he haunted the book and music shops, and worked as a reporter for the *Courier Mail* and at several other short-term jobs before sailing in 1951 for England, where he joined his friend Roger Covell, who would later make his mark as Professor of Music

at the University of New South Wales. From that year, at the age of 22, Porter made London his principal place of residence. He returned to Brisbane in 1954 during a period of emotional upheaval and depression but set off again within the year to test his fortunes as a writer in England. He would not return to his homeland for twenty years.

Peter Porter made his mark in London in the 'swinging Sixties' as a satiric poet. One reviewer described him as a 'tough, aggressive prize fighter'; another as 'fiercely democratic, like so many of his countrymen'. Against a background of John Osborne and the 'angry young men' of British theatre, the Beatles and contemporary myths of sexual liberation, poems such as 'Made in Heaven', 'Beast and the Beauty' and 'John Marston Advises Anger' had real resonance. Discerning readers also recognised a sensitive and vulnerable persona whose wit and aphoristic wisdom made his work arresting, exciting and thought-provoking.

Peter Porter's development as a poet in the 1950s and 60s owed much to an informal association of writers convened by Cambridge graduate Philip Hobsbaum in London and known as 'the Group'. Although Porter worked in advertising at this time, poetry was his great ambition. His personal life changed when he married Jannice Henry, a nurse, in 1961 and their first daughter Katherine was born in 1962; a second daughter, Jane, was born in 1965. Porter's first book of poems, *Once Bitten, Twice Bitten*, was published by the little known Scorpion Press in 1961 and this was followed in 1962 by a selection of twenty-six poems in the popular *Penguin Modern Poets* series. He was now on the road as a poet, with the result that by 1968 he took a courageous plunge into full-time writing as a free-lancer, writing poetry, literary journalism and taking part in public readings, BBC radio work and editing projects. At this time, such a commitment would not have been possible in any of the Australian cities. Porter's vigorous polemical style and oceanic knowledge of literature and its contexts marked him as a poet and metropolitan critic of rare distinction. He was poetry and fiction editor of the TLS in 1973–74 and his work appeared in *The New Statesman* and leading broadsheet newspapers.

Porter's *Sturm und Drang* period as a poet occurred in the late 1960s and early 70s. His poem 'On This Day I Complete My Fortieth Year' presents his Byronic persona 'piling on fuel for the dark'. A number of poems dramatise marriages in trouble. Disillusionment and pessimism recur and one poem concludes with a mutter from Schopenhauer: 'Man is ridiculous: if / it weren't for his death, / he'd have no value whatever – '. Alongside this mood, however, were more light-hearted poems incorporating the fresh-eyed experience of children such as 'Seahorses' or 'Fossil Gathering'.

The major emotional crisis in Peter Porter's life was the suicide in 1974 of his wife Jannice. His tenth volume of poems, *The Cost of Seriousness* (1974) contains a number of poems which deal with the writer's sense of guilt, complicity and indebtedness to Jannice, who remains a potent memory through the remainder of

his work. In poems such as 'An Exequy' or 'The Easiest Room in Hell', he faces 'the pointlessness of poetry' while demonstrating its power to convey deep emotion and thought. Such poems have been compared with Thomas Hardy's elegies on the death of his wife.

Another critical moment in the 1970s was Porter's first return visit to Australia in two decades, when he accepted an invitation to the Adelaide Festival in 1974. The misery of his Brisbane adolescence was rolled away as Porter encountered a 'new' Australia and began to engage seriously with a number of Australian writers including Les Murray, who became a literary sparring partner in essays and poems including 'On First Looking into Chapman's Hesiod'. If Murray's verse represented Boeotian ideals of country living, Porter surmised, he himself preferred the Attican ideal of the 'permanently upright city'. The possibility of new friendships and relationships in a re-imagined Australia was dramatised also in his poem 'An Australian Garden' in which an Australian woman and a vibrant multicultural Eden seem to offer themselves to him. In four collaborative volumes with Australian artist Arthur Boyd, Porter further revealed his virtuosic ability to reinvent myths that link Europe and Australia.

From 1981, when I first met Peter Porter in London and began work on my critical biography, *Spirit in Exile* (1991), he was beginning to engage at a deep level with the literary and cultural scene in his homeland. Some writers in Britain, including his friend Clive James, feared they might lose Peter's art of conversation to Australia. James mused in a verse letter to his friend that he would miss especially 'the way that Grub Street scandal / Is spiced by you with thoughts on Bach and Handel'. Many of us at a greater distance in Australia did indeed enjoy recurrent conversations with Peter, but he could not in the end leave London, where his third-floor Bayswater flat at 42 Cleveland Square W2 continued to provide a base for British and Australian writers and thinkers, other international visitors, and his cats (which appear in a number of his poems).

A substantial change occurred in the early 1980s when Porter commenced a relationship with Christine Berg, a psychologist. They were married in 1986 and Christine joined Peter in the Cleveland Street flat. In 1987 they visited Perth where Peter was writer-in-residence at the University of Western Australia. His lyrical poem, 'The Ecstasy of Estuaries', celebrates a southwest coast where local sun-loving people turn beached whales round and re-direct them out to the life-giving ocean. The poem is also about memory: the scene reminds the poet of his early childhood at Moreton Bay on the other side of the Australian continent, of a father and son together in a boat: 'This is the storytelling of the blood'. During a subsequent writing fellowship at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra he edited *The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse* (1996) and wrote playful poems about Australian birds and their sonorous associations for him.

The later phases of Porter's prodigious writing career are marked by remarkable productivity and wide public recognition, honours and awards. He was awarded Honorary Doctorates at the Universities of Melbourne, Sydney, Queensland and Loughborough. He received the Order of Australia medal and was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in the UK. He won the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry and the Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society. He was nominated as Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford and narrowly missed out to critic Christopher Ricks. Oxford University Press published a 2 volume *Collected Poems* in 1999 and shortly before Porter's death, Picador published *The Rest on the Flight: Selected Poems* (2010), which was republished in Australia with an introduction by David Malouf.

Music was Porter's favourite art form: 'And paradise, till we are there', he writes, 'Is in these measured lengths of air'. His own art found its medium in words fashioned into a variety of verse forms: 'Unlike our bodies which decay, / Words, first and last, have come to stay'.

He is survived by his second wife, Christine, and his daughters Katherine and Jane.

Bruce Bennett