

PETER DANIEL STEELE

1939–2012



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

My dear friend Peter Steele died on Wednesday 27 June 2012, after a long battle with cancer. Remaining strong until very close to the end, he managed to attend the launch of his last book, *Braiding the Voices: Essays in Poetry*, just sixteen days before his death. There was a deep satisfaction in this.

Steele grew up in Perth. Born on 22 August 1939, he went to a Christian Brothers school, and had felt the religious calling by the age of fifteen. He confesses himself to have been a boyhood bookworm, early into the way ‘romance is the stage at which we are intrigued by anything presented for learning’. His ‘romance’ included the local libraries in Perth. Such avid reading laid the ground for his becoming one of Australia’s most brilliant poets and critics: as verbally dazzling as he was modest.

He entered the Society of Jesus in 1957. As his brother Jack was to say much later, Peter had always been ‘a man with a plan’. Coming east, he began to train with the Jesuits who, in his phrase ‘knew what they were about’. Among the experiences of his novitiate, he always remembered long hikes around Melbourne’s north-east in hobnailed boots. During these years he completed a First Class degree in

English at the University of Melbourne, becoming a Tutor in the English Department from 1966 to 1971. In 1972 he was appointed to the lecturer position of Lockie Fellow in Australian Literature and Creative Writing. He did not teach the latter craft, however.

Peter Steele was ordained as a priest in December 1970, while continuing his graduate research and his University teaching, with great originality, wit and distinction. At the same time he was writing the poems which were to become his first collection, *Word from Lilliput* (1973).

At once brilliant, industrious and extremely self-effacing, Steele pressed ahead to write his doctoral thesis on Swift, and the subsequent book, *Jonathan Swift: Preacher and Jester* (1978). Published by Clarendon Press, this critical study reaches deep into the creative divisions in the mind of that passionate satirist. It is a book of great empathetic distinction.

Steele went on teaching in the English Department at Melbourne, ultimately coming to hold a Personal Chair. Except for six years as Provincial of the Jesuit Order in Australia, he remained a member of this Department until very recently. In his acknowledgements for the Swift book he gave particular thanks to Vincent Buckley and Evan Jones, fellow poets, who were also his closest friends in the Department at the time.

However, the eighteenth century did not hold him long in its toils: of his next two prose books, one is a study of poetry, especially that of the Americans, while the other is *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies of the Self on Show* (1989). *Show* is the key word here, given Steele’s longstanding fascination with the performative, the ostensible, the ludic; he has even written that ‘God’s folly is to be where fools are’. The author of a monograph on Steele’s work points to his focus on the jester, whether that japing figure be wise or intriguingly foolish.

But Steele was a committed poet, one whose style, at once dense and light, resembles nobody else’s. From his early *Word from Lilliput* through at least five more volumes these poems took modernist allusion and passionate irony in new directions, presided over by his Christian belief, of course, but also by the genial spirits of Montaigne and Cervantes. His last two collections, however, would offer

rather less ludic elasticity, more direct engagement with faith and with the Biblical text; both *A Local Habitation: Poems and Homilies* and *The Gossip and the Wine* were published in 2010.

Steele had been Rector of Campion House in Kew since 1973, but his pastoral administration came to involve him far more deeply when he was appointed Provincial Superior of the Society of Jesus in Australia. He filled this demanding role from 1985 to 2000. On the academic side, he held Visiting Professorships at the Universities of Alberta, Loyola, Chicago and Fordham, New York; his lasting overseas connection was with Georgetown University, where he taught in 1994 and again from 2006 to 2008.

In *Expatriates: Reflections on Modern Poetry* (1985) Steele had been obliged to share the reflections with his burden of responsibilities as Provincial. It consists of twelve essays on single poems, eight of them American; one of the other poets was Scottish, one Argentine and one Polish, the great Zbigniew Herbert. The remaining poet, represented by his 'Quixotic Sestina', was one Michael Kent, who turned out to be Steele himself, that quixotic thinker, up to his tricks.

Among the subjects he taught at Melbourne, Steele invented a wide-ranging course on cities, one on travel writing, and shared with Chris Wallace-Crabbe a 'Studies in Autobiography' seminar; it ranged from St Augustine's confessions to such disparate folk as Hal Porter and Jean-Paul Sartre. This proved to be the prelude to a new critical work, *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self on Show* (1989), an archipelago of fertile chapters on various writers' 'fascination with the grit and rondure of experience'. The book begins with Boswell, 'The Autobiographer as Scapegrace', branching out to the writings of many self-writers and free spirits.

Steele's creative work fed constantly back into his innovative teaching, much as his recent volume of homilies interwove with his continuing life as a priest. He taught sparkling new courses, amid much else. Every kind of

discourse he touched bears his own ardent, uniquely playful stamp; his depth finds itself in intellectual speed, in a whole archipelago of analogies. It seems apt to say that he was an intellectual diagonalist, yet devout at the same time. As colleague and friend, he was invaluable: a strong, courteous gentleman, ever fond of a pizza at Papa Gino's in Carlton.

Returning to his poems, the beautiful 2003 collection, *Plenty*, draws its readers into the tantalizing realm of ekphrastic poetry, a country whose poems have their origins in works of visual art. This kind of parallel, or metaphorical, cousinage occupied him deeply in his latter years, so that *Plenty* was followed by a second gorgeous book in the same vein. *The Whispering Gallery: Art into Poetry* was published in 2006, as the result of observation and speculation in the National Gallery of Victoria collections. Rembrandt and Poussin, Senbergs and Cossington Smith, William Blake and Walter Burley Griffin, are some of the fifty-five artists shown here in colour plates, with fresh poems beside them. What is more, these poems display the very height of Steele's invention.

White Knight with Bee Box: New and Selected Poems proved to be a resting point aligned with the onset of Steele's final illness, but two years later, in *The Gossip and the Wine*, he turned to lyrics that were springing directly from the gospel story: directly yes but, as ever, diagonally. As suggested earlier, he wrote prose and poetry to almost the very end. I think sadly of the valedictory poem which begins 'Monday is Day Oncology...'.
 .

The reputation of Peter Steele burgeoned gradually, given such versatility combined with innate modesty, but his writing changed many expectations about what Australian literature has to offer. In this country, but also in the United States and elsewhere, his influence flourishes in many corners, on many campuses. Moreover, his creative energy was unabating. He was, in my judgment, the most original of men.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE FAHA