

PHILIP JAMES AYRES

1944 – 2021

FELLOW · ELECTED 1999

Professor Philip J. Ayres began his academic career with a PhD from the University of Adelaide on Elizabethan revenge tragedy, a topic and historical period which would interest him lifelong in a variety of guises. This work won him the university's coveted Denham Prize and was instrumental in his appointment as a Lecturer at Monash University in 1972. Though no one knew it at the time, Philip was destined to become a modern version of the Renaissance man of many glowing parts, varied in his interests, enriched by deep friendships, an engaging conversationalist, a prolific author with a tenacious memory, and widely travelled in most regions of the globe. In what follows, I do not intend to recount in detail his many achievements or publications. They have already appeared in a *Vale* from the Academy, nor will all his major interests be listed. Instead, I shall attempt to reveal a little more about the individual behind the data, or what connects the diverse elements, and what made him so fascinating.

On my shelves are three books of his, each revelatory of the man. The earliest is a somewhat battered copy of *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by John Traugott. Inside in his familiar script stands "Philip J. Ayres. 1973". Here is testimony of Philip at the outset of his career. What first strikes me is that while my own copy of this Prentice-Hall publication is in handsome condition and looks as if for decades it added lustre to my bookshelves and little else, his displays obvious signs of intense and focused study. Contributors' essays are heavily underlined in a systematic fashion, with straight or undulating lines, different pen colours, and further marginal markings. Dr. Ayres was certainly very well prepared for his Renaissance and Eighteenth Century teaching, and already an important intellectual interest emerges from these annotations. What attracts him without fail is discussion of how Sterne's work challenges the epistemological systems of the day. John Locke may have stood high in the contemporary intellectual firmament, but Sterne, to Philip's delight, would have none of it. And this attraction to the rebel, the iconoclast, the bravely independent thinker would remain over coming decades, and become an important aspect of Philip's complex personality.

The second work is a pristine copy of Ben Jonson's *Sejanus: His Fall* (1990), which Philip, by now an internationally recognised scholar, edited meticulously. The introduction, textual apparatus, and notes are everything one would expect, but there is a subtext to this choice, which is far from being opportunistic or purely career-driven. The project appealed because the play dealt with politics (and Philip's interests had already moved beyond conventional English Studies); it was by Ben Jonson whom he much admired; and it dealt with Roman history, a constant source of reference and wisdom for the editor. And, at an even deeper level, he found irresistible a story dealing with a great individual's fall from grace, his mental disarray, and sense of unexpected, shocking personal loss. This tragedy resonated deeply with the editor. Apart from scholarly work on Elizabethan drama, his academic reputation was cemented by carefully researched studies in the history of ideas, such as *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England* (1997) and a multi-volume edition of the Earl of Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1999). Laurence Sterne now had many eighteenth-century companions, and Philip was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

The third book is Philip's landmark *Malcolm Fraser: A Biography* (1987). This was the first of a series of life studies of Australian public figures of the stature and diversity of explorer Sir Douglas

Mawson; High Court Judge and diplomat Owen Dixon; Archbishop Patrick Francis Moran; and High Court Judge and Governor-General of Australia Sir Ninian Stephen. Adventure, singular ambition, public service, and commitment to excellence and the shaping of Australian society are shared traits. The Fraser biography, however, holds a special place. It established Philip as one of the nation's pre-eminent biographers, and it illustrated (to searching eyes) the contentious adage that all writing is, in some respects, autobiographical. Its opening is unforgettable. The chapter is headed "Foundations," yet it begins with the theme of unrelenting, unimpedable destruction. "Fortune, the historian Edward Gibbon observed in regard to the political world, spares neither man nor his proudest works," a truth immediately illustrated by a brief but vivid vignette of a Fraser family-home "of elegantly classical proportions" being demolished. "Against the wall a hoarse-coughing engine cranked a tall crane, which with casual and indifferent force swung a metal ball into the stone and the plaster." Philip at his best was a gripping stylist, who unfailingly grasped the special and salient points of his subject. Also the very large distance that seems to separate the young man's dissertation topic from his later work shrinks remarkably—Edward Gibbon, the trials of misfortune *and* fortune, the revenge wreaked by fate or destiny on the noble, mainly blameless individual, and so much more are constants, reflected again in many of his literary interests, such as intense engagement with the works of Joseph Conrad.

What would a Renaissance man be without a stellar trajectory and exemplary destiny? In the 1980s his private life soared and crashed. He divorced and, after a time, remarried a cosmopolitan, elegant woman, who enchanted him and opened much appreciated vistas. Being of Chilean origin and well-connected within the Chilean expatriate community in Australia, she introduced him to a new continent and fascinating compatriots from very varied backgrounds. None of these would be more important than Professor Claudio Veliz, then at Latrobe University, later in a senior position at Boston University. He was instrumental in introducing Philip to a number of committed right-wing figures of both national and international standing. This confirmed Philip in his political orientation and in the powerful sense he had of moving away from conventional, narrow English Studies. Philip quite rightly saw himself as an international intellectual, and this was confirmed by temporary teaching appointments at Vassar College and Boston University, by invited public addresses, as well as by membership of learned bodies and national committees. Nevertheless, the eventual dissolution of his second marriage in the mid-1980s hit him very hard: he felt without reprieve the entire, crushing weight of that implacable wrecking ball.

In 2006 Philip took early retirement from Monash University and devoted his abundant energies elsewhere. He purchased a gracious Federation home in country Victoria, began to restore it meticulously (its previous owners had left it sound but tired), and set about establishing a wide circle of Western District friends from diverse backgrounds. A hallmark of his life was always a striking capacity for tunnel vision. When he had a project, academic or profane, he devoted himself to it with a rare intensity. Hence the outstanding productivity, and hence the country pleasure dome he conjured up out of wide but drab rural streets. Nothing was left to chance or done haphazardly. He researched magazines and decorator publications of the era, and had the most attractive features he found there reproduced by local craftspeople. Sitting on ample land with spacious outbuildings, it was all ripe for development, and he added garden features I have never seen in a metropolitan period home (they have not done their research).

Inevitably the home revealed many of his interests. Outbuildings offered shelter to a red Alfa Spyder convertible and a prize-winning Ducati 900cc Super Sport motor bike, both of which were maintained in peak condition. The Great Ocean Road was within easy reach, an ideal terrain for him and friends to exercise their Ducatis. Philip adored Italy, would live there intermittently, and had

specialised knowledge of various Italian productions: literary, architectural, and industrial. The quest for perfection (he would have said completion) within “Gilgai,” his home, was untiring. One evening he arrived with a Japanese print, and literally for the next hours knew no peace as he constantly sprang from his chair to try it somewhere else in his main living-room until its perfect placement was achieved. It remains there to this day. Signs of other interests were plentiful, from stereoscopic, 3-D photography, through watch and camera collections, to such musical instruments as spinet and grand piano. He also participated energetically in local events and helped found the Western Mountain Walking Group, that began with scaling local, extinct volcanos and eventually moved some activities to Tasmania.

Perhaps most endearing of all, for decades he shared his home with a hand-raised native bird. That is, a bird which, upon hatching, is constantly touched, carried, and cared for by human hands, and basically is at liberty to fly freely within the home. One of his favourites was a rainbow lorikeet. The kind of dynamic this could produce between creature and owner was extraordinary to the uninitiated. Philip was able to mix among the most select social groups, yet capable of almost childish joys and confident enough in himself to show unconventional sides of his chosen life.

Finally, there is Philip the adventurer. The term is entirely appropriate. He lived for a time with the Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He was also a guest of the Revolutionary Guard in Iran, and delighted in telling stories from these stays, such as about the dyed red water, representing blood, in the central fountain to the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq war in Teheran. And he didn't necessarily cut a heroic figure in these accounts. In war-ravaged Somalia he had an AK-47 stuck into his midriff by a young rebel (about as tall as his weapon was high), who in broken English demanded Philip's camera. Philip chose the path of potential death, kept his Leica camera and life, but later admitted it wasn't really his smartest decision. Naturally, too, these experiences shaped his judgments, gave him an insider's flair. When once asked what would happen now that America and its allies (including Australia) had invaded Afghanistan and pushed out the Taliban, he said: “It's simple, we'll lose. In the eyes of the locals we are all infidels, and it is their sacred duty to drive us out.” Such knowledge and commonsense unfortunately were not heeded in directive, higher echelons. He was particularly widely travelled in Africa, South America, Europe, and the United States. Finally, Philip met many major international figures both at home and overseas, and was proud to have a foreword to his Fraser biography written by former French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing.

At his former city home there were two beautiful, enlarged photographs that he had taken hanging, apparently casually, in a small room. One was of a moody, wintry vista in the grounds of Chatswood. The panorama highlighted a Palladian structure, the surrounding greens were subdued, a distinct note of melancholy was detectable. The other photo, taken much closer to its subject, featured a pale, stony mountain top, into which Mujahideen had dug an ample emplacement for an anti-aircraft weapon. Dressed very much as today, they looked tough, committed, but well disposed towards the photographer. The whole was bathed in clear, bright sunshine, further peaks faded into the distance. Two very different worlds, embraced and plumbed by Professor Philip Ayres, who chose to be much more than a nine-to-five academic.

Of course the author within him was not to be denied indefinitely. His last years saw once again a noteworthy output, that included an edition of letters of Owen Dixon and, fittingly, a last composition entitled *Private Encounters in the Public World* (2019). This basically devotes chapters to the noteworthy people he had met and learned from in a very rich life, and those who wish to read more about his doings and thoughts should refer to this original volume.

Philip is sorely missed by those who knew him, his family, and in particular his son Julian and grandchildren, who, one hopes, will be inspired by more than one aspect of their grandfather's colourful and rewarding life.

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