

Some tracks Ted Riethmuller travelled

(An obituary for the Journal of the Brisbane Branch of the Labour History)

Lives are lived forward. We zig, we zag, leap and bound, settle and roam by turns, leaving the writers of obituaries at the disadvantage of having to reduce intricacies across decades to a few hundred words in something approximating order, a neatness burnished by the distortions from the retellings that keep our memories fresh. Parts of each life remain unknown, not least to ourselves.

For labour historians, I could limn a life story for Ted Riethmuller by drawings lines between our first encounter and our second last.

Handing out how-to-vote cards for two country by-elections on July 1, 1961 at the polling booth in the Treasury Building was a solitary occasion until the early afternoon Ted strolled by, stopped to chat long enough for me to encourage him to join Young Labor and come to its weekend school on 'Can Capitalism Survive?' He did, bringing Rodney Hall, from the Realist Writers, who became a mutual friend.

From the Labor Party, Ted moved into the Communist Party and onto the Socialist Alliance, entertaining a shy hope that the answer to the question 'Can capitalism survive?' might yet prove to be 'no'. His gut never wavered from the conviction that it deserved to perish.

The last public occasion was on May 11, 2018 when his son Max brought Ted to a talk on the 1917 general strike for the Labour History Society when I was back in Brisbane for a conference celebrating the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth.

Those details suggest much about Ted's concerns but are only one strand of his life.

For instance, he soon introduced me to Friedrich Nietzsche and Norman Lindsay. His attachment to each spoke of an independence of mind. The conventional wisdom, and not only on the Left, was that an anti-Semitic Nietzsche proclaimed the Nazism Superman. In 1959, Ted had found a paperback of Walter Kaufman's overturning of the distortions inflicted by Nietzsche's sister. *Der Ubermensch* is not the Aryan blond beast but humankind liberated from Christian guilt about sex and much more.

As Ted prepared to go overseas in 1963, he offered friends the pick of his books. I chose the Kaufman. He let me take it but admitted it was a volume he had hoped no one would select. I have it still.

Norman Lindsay was another off-key choice for a leftie. Lindsay announced himself as racist, sexist, war-monger, prejudices he exaggerated to shock in rebelling against wowsers and censorship. As much as Ted reveled in Lindsay's Rubensian females, he saw that many of the figures were

not human beings, but nymphs and satyrs. His comments as he turned the pages of his volume of drawings and watercolours to explain his responses revealed with how much care he looked.

He brought that watchful yet warm eye to his photography to achieve an objectivity available only to a participant observer, like his admired Cartier-Bresson. Another of Ted's gifts to us are thousands of images from marches, protests, picket lines and rallies.

By 1962, Ted had moved into a two-storied student house at 43 Rosecliffe street, Dutton Park, overlooking the river to the university, a setting for a fiction, or collective memoir as proposed by Ruth Blair, another mutual friend made there. Ted, however, set his novel, *Take Your Partners*, around West End, a decade later with a central chapter which could be headed 'Nietzsche at Nimbin'. Women take the lead in a liberation, as erotic as it is gentle, where each is portrayed with a distinctiveness made vibrant by the fineness of the writing.

A different facet shines from stories about working life. Ted served his apprenticeship at Bundaberg to qualify as an electrician, a life-long activist with the Electrical Trades Union and on its Honorary Members Committee. The Brisbane Branch of Labour History is to publish a selection, some of which have appeared in this journal. If far from reportage, the stories never stray far from moments expressive of dignity in a working life. Often with a first-person narrator, who is rarely the protagonist, Ted observes himself and others making what they can from cooperative labours while they are shadowed by its degradation under the rule of capital. Ted looked to socialism as an escape from being caught between the urgings of foremen to rush a job and union rules against putting in the unpaid time needed to gain the satisfaction from a task done well and truly. That expectation of a modest utopia drew on the pleasures he found in his copper-plate hand, by rummaging in the tool-box inherited from his axe man father, and in the lost art of drinking out of a water-bag.

As he drove by places where he had worked, Ted took pride in knowing that he had had a hand in turning on the lights. He came to worry that the Left, in losing touch with place, was losing contact with the people who keep our environments even half-way habitable. 'Yes, I'm a patriot and also a proud nationalist. Isn't everyone?' His was a nationalism where action against imperialism keeps internationalism more than rhetorical. As he and Katrina were driving back from Lindsay's Springwood studio through the New England district one autumn, the deciduous trees 'provided a very pleasing display.' 'I love Australia. How beautiful it is.'

Publication of the novel and the stories are to be collective efforts as he enjoyed at the Realist Writers' group and from Bill Sutton in the People's Bookshop.

Ted learnt to write with clarity, coherence and conviction from a lifetime of reading, whether a youthful and lasting enthusiasm for du Maupassant or, in his retirement, delights from Alice Munro. Yet, he wrote of 'a gap in my heart' which print could not satisfy in the way that had the Apu trilogy, 'a triumph of humanism and realism. My life has been so much more worth living for having seen it.'

Michel de Montaigne, in seeking to make sense of why he and Etienne de La Boetie had become so close, could do no more than to conclude 'Because he was he and I was I.' Something of the inexplicable plays its part in every lasting relationship. But there is a remark of Ted's that goes to explain his many friendships. When he went to a Socialist Alliance Conference in Melbourne in 2006, I arranged for him to stay with Peter Curtis, whom he had not met. Shortly afterwards, Ted wrote to say that he had not expected to make a new good friend at his age but had done so with Peter. One reason for their immediate and easy regard is that they share principles about how to treat others, whether strangers or intimates. Ted knew that we are not here to take but to give as he did in his years as secretary of Brisbane Labour History,

Memories of Ted through his manifold works will keep us doing whatever we can to put those decencies into practice – at work and throughout the world, ever encouraged by his maxim that 'It's okay not to cope.'

Humphrey McQueen
Canberra

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