

EULOGY: on the death of Bill Bradshaw

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To the extent that Paul Keating had an early mentor in his lifelong interest in neo-classicism, the Sydney antique dealer Bill Bradshaw was the one. When Bill Bradshaw died at the age of 87, his friends asked Paul Keating to give the eulogy. Delivered extemporaneously, the eulogy provides a rare snapshot of the golden age of antique dealing and a colourful picture of a remarkably complex and interesting individual. Perhaps as much as that, it provides another element in the matrix of Paul Keating's intellectual interests and associations unconnected with public life. Replete with humorous anecdotes, the eulogy authentically conveys some of the colour of the period and the characters involved.

This is a sad occasion for us all. We come to mourn Bill Bradshaw— a dear friend to everybody here.

With his passing comes the end of an era. An era that was a reflection of another time and another Australia. An era of knowledge and of connoisseurship, of remarkable erudition and of an empathy with perhaps a more romantic world, the world of the nineteenth century.

Self-taught, Bill possessed great aesthetic sensibilities. As a sixteen year old he started business with his mother. Approaching the finish of primary school, he had asked his mother for a book on Regency furniture. With his own eyes and his own taste, and without any specific education in the arts, he developed an acute sense of shape and form both of decoration and of architecture, so much so he was able to make a trade of it for the rest of his life. His perceptions were always insightful and always inspired. They were also inspiring.

I think it's true to say that he had the aesthetic and artistic sensibilities of an artist. Though not an artist himself, the eyes and the senses were artistic, though not artistic in the modern or contemporary sense. But, like anybody with an eye for anything good, he liked anything good of any time and of any period. But his great interest was the nineteenth century, from 1800 right through even to well into the twentieth century, as you could hear from the Prelude which he chose for this service today. A kind of fruitiness in the music which paralleled the fruitiness of his interests in things later of the nineteenth century.

In a trade dominated by Australia's Victorian heritage, he fashioned and fostered, more or less on his own, a taste for classicism, a classicism that Australia really never knew. While some of it existed in the first quarter of the nineteenth century in New South Wales and Tasmania, it was overtaken, in general, by what we now call second period rococo or Victoriana, as the colonies grew in wealth and as tastes changed in Europe. But as many of us here understand, the essence of this

classicism grew from and belonged to the third quarter of the eighteenth century and this is where Bill's eyes really were, where the essence of his interests really laid. At its apogee in 1800, the style informed some of our early architecture; things in the city by Greenway and other architects, and was the source for some important buildings, notably Elizabeth Bay House here in Sydney and others in Tasmania. And, in the decline of classicism, other more baroque forms of Victoriana.

In English terms, its heyday was of course the Regency, the period Bill loved and admired perhaps above all others. For Bill the Regency kind of had it all. It had the classicism, it had the glitz, clothing Britannia in all her glory at the height of her powers. His proselytising in favour of this style really changed the developed taste of Sydney. And I think it is completely true to say that, more or less alone, and from sheer belief and passion, he informed the taste of a community, away from the prevailing tastes. In Sydney, of course, this was the balloon back chair, the elaborately decorated chiffonier, the ornamented cabriole leg. Bill did his best to do that style in, but of course, it could never be completely defeated. He knew that too. He used to call it 'bordello baroque' or 'whorehouse rococo'. And while on the one hand he despised it, and he did despise it, for its fakery, on the other, he was charmed by its earnest, try hard romanticism. But, to be contrary, he claimed this interest in William IV-cum-early-Victorian furniture. Many of us would say 'Bill, why are you doing that, when you know the real stuff only exists around 1800?' But he kind of wanted you to know you couldn't put him in a box. He was intermittently fascinated with this more fruity style and that then went to such things as American shelf clocks, musical boxes and pianos, where he became the great authority in pianoforte and early pianos. That came from the classic furniture interest; it also came from his off-beat musical interests.

A friend of mine once said that 'there are only two kinds of people, lovers and others, and who wants to be one of the others'. Well, Bill was not one of the others. He was someone who loved the romantic drumbeat and really ran his life by it. In the dichotomy we hear between the 'the punishers' and 'the enlargers', Bill was without a doubt an 'enlarger'. True to his Catholic egalitarianism he hated overbearingness and pomp, he held the monarchy in contempt, and was a committed republican. He was not sure about my Native Title Act. He thought I'd taken things a bit far. His enlargement didn't embrace everything but his life was guided by a certain moral compass. A bit skittish on occasions, but mostly true.

The fact is, Bill was a complete original. We will not see the likes of him, perhaps not ever again. Coming from where he did as a young man in the first half of the twentieth century, growing into adulthood through the second half of the twentieth century and in business, his attitudes and interests were often a reflection of the Edwardian 1920s and 1930s period of his mother's epoch. Those interests in that way of life and social norms were part of his background. Of course, it is unlikely to ever appear in this guise again. As I said, it's the end of an era.

That ferocious brain, the laser-like focus, the brilliance, the whimsy, the caprice, all came together to give us something and someone original.

Bill was capable of new perspectives. You could say something to him and he would cut through the detail to its essence in a second. It was such a good mind. He would

invariably think outside the paradigm. Sometimes a bit mad but always interesting. Though, of course, while he could often be hard to get along with, and God knows we have all had a tongue-lashing from him, he was consummately generous. Generous in spirit and generous in knowledge; he gave the knowledge away to people. To people in the trade, many a dealer was encouraged by Bill and taught things by him. Some he despised, like Stanley Lipscombe, or 'Stella', as he used to call him. But in the big ledger, Bill was a help rather than a hindrance.

But I suppose the thing most of us loved about him was his zaniness, the surreal behaviour, the unpredictability, the thunderbolts of brilliance. You know, I came one day, at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, it would have been in the late 1980s or early 1990s and Keith Lehane was holding shop. I could hear the piano going in the upstairs parlour and there he was pumping away at one of these piano players with mechanical fingers, with a piano roll inside. He was up there belting out one of those big Klondike saloon numbers and he said to me as I walked in 'This was Lola Montez's favourite tune'. At three in the afternoon, going for his life, by himself, pumping at the pedals; it was surreal. You said to yourself, 'I'm not going to see this anywhere else.'

He was one of the funniest people ever. The off-beat humour, the ribald conjuring of images, the stiletto observations, the irreverence, the vicious remark, there was really no-one like him. Bill was pure mischief. And no-one was really more amused by him than he himself. I think he was completely amused by his own behaviour. It sort of kept him going, ridiculous as it often was.

But a slab of the old Australia goes with him, including the working-class vernacular. We all know how the jokes have died, how the use of language has declined. He loved words; he loved the play on words, the humour from the roots from which all of us here came. He could have been a gag-writer, or an art historian, or a spinner of stories, or a classical scholar, or a musicologist, or a museum curator or a slapstick comedian. He could have been anyone because he really was a construct of all of them. And that's what we loved about him: the erudition, the zaniness, the brilliance, and the passion, but mostly the irreverent originality. He was always irreverent and always original. And the phrases: 'Never argue with a mug', etcetera.

Of course we had the extended comic phases with him and his mother, Ruby. Paul Kenny used to talk about the 'Big Sister' pudding phase when they discovered Big Sister puddings. Opening the top of the can with a can opener, a pudding would reveal itself and they'd chop right into it. Anyone who'd been invited to the shop, whom he used to often call 'victims'—'another victim'—he'd have the tea out with the Big Sister pudding to hand. Then there was the 'Camp Pie' phase where he and his mother put the Camp Pie on toast; the endless rounds of tea, the diphtheria risk with the crockery. Bill would often say to me, 'Don't wash that cup, it's OK' and I would say, 'No, I'll wash it up, Bill'. You would wash it to prolong your own life. And then, of course, the wedding cake episode from David Jones. Paul Kenny tells the story of Rube telling Bill she's bored. She said, 'I'm bored witless, Bill. For Christ's sake, go down to David Jones and get us a decent cake.' So he comes back in a taxi with a three-tier wedding cake which they then, unceremoniously, proceeded to chop to pieces. Hopped straight into it, and had the remnants ready for anyone who came in that week.

The shop was always amusing. We had the stewardship of 'Matron' Lehane, who was the early carer and janitor. John, the offshore diver who was affectionately called 'The Mermaid' and also known as 'The Princess Kinkara' for his tea-making prowess. Then his theatre-usher friend, Peter Berry, whom he called 'the glow worm', and of course, his daily comic jousts with Pearl Palmer to see who could out-pun whom. What contests they were! The thing to do was to be around when they turned up in form, two great wits going at one another. A kind of intellectual marking taking place.

He loved funny people. I remember being with him with Serge Baillache at Westbourne Grove in London, where Serge ran a shop. Serge said, 'Bill, tell me some of your great retail stories.' Bill told him some and Serge said 'I'll tell you one of mine'. He said that down the road there was a titled noblewoman who turned up in a very drab, light powder blue overcoat and hat, with a bag over her arm as does the Queen. He said she'd walk into the shop and walk right past him, not even acknowledging his presence. She would go up to everything, look at it, hold it and price it. He said that one day when she came in there was a terracotta bust on the far side of the window box. To reach it, she threw down the handbag on the window box ledge and crawled across the window to have a closer look at the figure. The moment she did, someone walked in the shop and said, 'Sir, how much is that bag in the window?' And Serge, quick as a flash, replied 'I'm sorry, madam, it's just been sold'. Bill roared.

He loved that banter. He loved London; he loved Britain, because it was really the home of his interest. He soaked up the places and the trade and the things you could not see here. He went there until his health prevented him from going. But he loved fun, like about Keith Ball who retailed Chinese antiques next door. He used to say to me, 'You know, Keith's the oldest thing in the shop'. He could be wittily savage.

This is one I witnessed myself. This very important lady, with a toffy voice, came in. She was looking around and Bill, I used to say that he'd come out of that door like a black widow spider, with somebody on his web. Some victim had walked through his door. So in the haughty voice she says, 'Good afternoon Mr Bradshaw, what is this?' He said, 'Well, Madam, that's a campaign bed made of blued steel and brass; they were screwed together on the battlefields for the generals.'

'Oh,' she said, 'yes, I've heard of those but I did not realise they were so big'.

He retorted, 'Oh yes, Madam, big enough for a general and two drummer boys.' Rather taken aback, she said 'Oh, oh'.

Then the next thing she lit upon was one of those Directoire clocks with two black male figures leaning on either side of a wool bale, with a diadem in the hair with a pair of paste diamonds for eyes. And she said, 'This is very attractive, Mr Bradshaw.'

He said, 'Madam, this model was a favourite of a number of English queens.' And then with a pause he said, 'Cecil Beaton, Noel Coward, Norman Hartnell' and he went down a list. Then she knew she was in some kind of trouble.

Moving towards the door, the last thing on display was a pair of girandoles, or candlestick lustres, you know, American ones, made in Philadelphia, which featured American Indian scenes in bronze relief.

She said, 'They're very striking, Mr Bradshaw. Do you have any Australian ones?' He said, 'Madam, there may have been one or two examples, and now there is a great demand for them. As a matter of fact, I'm working up a model right now using the same basic shape—indeed, I've just finished modelling up Raelene and Chantelle from Green Valley for the central image.' At that moment she knew that she was in strife and left. He said, 'That'll teach the old bag to put on the dog with me.'

He was a ferocious salesman. I used to say, 'You're like a black widow spider'. He'd sidle out of that narrow door and come upon them. If they were old customers he would know the approach, but if they were new customers he'd go through the patter, slowly reeling them in—it was something to see.

With Bill gone a piece of all of us goes with him. Life will be that much less good because you won't be able to turn into Queen Street and find him there with a cup of tea begging. Or Ken Muggleston ready to greet you at the door.

But, he taught us all something. The passion, the energy, the belief, the inner confidence in his own taste and the styles he favoured and would proselytise for. His originality and the memory of him will, I think, always warm our hearts. People come through your life and they leave. With Bill, we have all lost a mentor and friend, but as a trade, the antique trade has lost its oldest and most important member. This will say something again about the change in Australian life and Australian society. And of the fashions and tastes. It will be a diminished business without him. We come today to remember and to celebrate him and to acknowledge how much we all loved him. He was remarkable and completely unforgettable.