

In Memoriam Patrick Wolfe

Liz Conor

Voltaire's Calligrapher was the title of the novel Patrick loaned me when I visited his bush haven in Chum's Creek in December 2015. I'd snuck up there after we'd swotted and commiserated through our respective ARC Future Fellowship applications. Not liking my chances, I sought his tips on doing the work you love, sometimes without 'the lash of wages'. Patrick had seemed to make a fist of his scandalous precarity, if not a virtue. In the way these prosaic transactions and happenstances assume import when a life is lost wretchedly too soon, I hadn't quite known what to do with Patrick's borrowed novel. I couldn't pick it up – until these heartfelt tributes came in from Patrick's colleagues, comrades and friends, categories he revelled in muddling.

The jacket blurb describes the novel as 'a (mischievously) historical novel, a thriller, a philosophical work too, a novel of adventures', and Patrick went on leaping off the page throughout. In one small detail, a 'little iron stove' called to mind his proud tour of his home, protractedly rebuilt after the Black Saturday fires of February 2009. On cold nights, he explained, he'd shut down the house and retreat to his study for days, cooking on the stove top and writing into the deep silence. From here Patrick was bringing history to life, reframing understandings with his indispensable diachronics of race-making.

But on the dazzling December day I visited, all the doors were thrown open. He and his son Sean were rendering around a planted bed. Patrick was in fine form; genial, attentive, jovial. Also there was the dignified reserve with which he walked me through the fruit trees in the orchard dedicated to his recently lost sister Mary. Just off the amphitheatre cemented over the huge water tank, a fire bunker was dug into the hillside. It opened like a Dorothy hurricane hatch, with a peekaboo window to witness the front passing over. Enough oxygen for

six hours for six people he nodded assuredly, and I could see Patrick holed up in there sheltering and no doubt entertaining half the mountainside. He seemed invincible, all set up and raring to go after these daunting setbacks.

Over his famous 'pasta simplicimus', out on the veranda, we swapped fire stories, looking through the recovered gums down to Coranderrk (it is this vista, and how it placed him, that he so decorously presents in the first chapter of his book *Traces of History*). I blathered about climate and even fell for it when this virtuosic scholar said with characteristic self-effacement, 'I know nothing, tell me everything'. Knowing I was heading to Paris for a spot of guerrilla theatre at COP21 (United Nations Climate Change Conference) he extolled the Knitting Nannas who blockade the Toolangi coupes. Then he drove me up there, first putting me in a pair of his knockabout sandals.

Patrick knew a shortcut onto the boardwalk that wound through fairy dells of tree ferns along a pristine creek. He pointed out primeval stalks of fungi and after an interlude of me plapping along the wooden trail, shod like a hobbit, he bid me close my eyes and led me by the elbow to a 'surprise'. 'Now', he said and standing there before us was one of the few remaining Grand Old Dowagers of the ancient forest, vaulting into the birdsong. Six grown men could not have spanned her; god only knows how they managed to fell so many like her. As I craned, marvelling, Patrick could barely contain his delight, beaming and jiggling from foot to foot as though he'd just introduced me to Rosa Luxemburg. Still, these could never be places indulgently removed from his central preoccupation, 'There is no such thing as wilderness, only depopulation', he writes in *Traces of History*.

I didn't know Patrick half so well nor so long as many of the contributors to this memorial. Each of the tributes that follow reflect the singularity of their collaboration, comradeship, friendship and rapport. The gyre of his analysis is manifest, as is the span of his curiosity, his vivid historicising and hawkeyed erudition, all internationally celebrated. We thought a dedicated homage from those so engaged with Patrick Wolfe's work was more than warranted. We pulled it together in something of a scramble so we apologise to the legions of colleagues we may have overlooked.

Patrick brought to our attention the 'xenologies' by which human collectivities have been differentiated and insisted that difference under colonialism is invariably hierarchical; 'to vary is to be defective'. He had a gift for the memorable theoretical zinger: race is 'already an "ism"'; it is 'not so much a concept as a sensation'; it 'enabled universality to presuppose distinction'; it is a 'process not an ontology'; it is 'an ever-shifting contest'; it is 'immune to emancipation'. In lucid majuscule he drew out the intimacy between industrialisation and colonialism. His brisk scrutiny of supposition led to startling assertions:

dispossession was not merely a transferral of ownership, but the replacement of one system of ownership with another. Never far from Marx, he saw blood as 'like money, which also invokes liquidity to disguise the social relations that sustain it'. Colonisers 'did not set out to create racial doctrine. They set out to create wealth'. You 'can be an ex-slave, but you can't be ex-black'. And who can (or should) forget Patrick's locomotive tenets: 'Invasion is a structure not an event'. Settler-colonialism inheres a 'logic of elimination'. With these stonking, barnstorming interventions he simply remapped the field of colonial history.

When the grant somehow came through for me, he was nothing but big-hearted and cheering. It felt bittersweet, even unseemly after all his mentoring, for such a *sui generis* researcher to be so summarily snubbed. He replied from Ramallah, just before negotiating the Qalandiya checkpoint, 'Hey – I'm a survivor'. What can that mean now?

In the idiosyncrasy of grief, each will no doubt have their own version of what it is about Patrick that is inextinguishable. Acclaimed here are his élan, his bearhugs, his expansive laugh, his teaching, his activism, his acuity, his thoughtfulness. These qualities all shine through these heartfelt and eloquent tributes, all tellingly personal, they all express indebtedness to Patrick's prodigious contribution: they each do him proud. Doubtless, they were all difficult to write and we are all the more honoured to draw them together in these pages. In *Voltaire's Calligrapher* the French philosopher remarks, if your path is history it will be accompanied by the departed. Historians are accustomed to their company and sometimes their guidance. But Patrick's unique exuberance and luminosity will carry us into new inquiry with the very best company we could ask for. We remain 'as ever' in his wake.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 40, 2016*,
edited by Liz Conor, published 2016 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.