

Introduction: John Lucas – A Melianthropy Man

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Since the word ‘melianthropy’ does not exist, I have invented it as my small tribute to John: it means the capacity for making people’s lives better and fuller. A year ago, having sent out innumerable letters of invitation to contribute to the present ‘special issue’ of *Critical Survey* in honour of John Lucas, his many friends responded with such speed and enthusiasm, and with such wonderful things to say about him-who-was-to-be-honoured, that I thought of scrapping the original idea of publishing essays, poems and reminiscences and simply printing the letters themselves instead. All solicited were ‘honoured’ or ‘flattered’ to be asked, but many added more: ‘a close friend and someone who has offered so much to so many of us, both in literature and in life’; ‘as well as being a fine poet and deep-searching author, John is one of the most generous-spirited men I’ve ever known, and it is not surprising that he has such a very wide circle of friends drawn from his many interests and his work’; ‘John is not only a very close friend but the most generous man I am ever likely to meet. I could never begin to repay his goodness to me’; ‘John deserves only the very best’; ‘John is among those whose friendship I most value and whose work I most highly regard. A very remarkable man – how does he do it? – and loyal and heartening friend’; yet another refers to ‘his and Pauline’s warm hospitality and infectious enthusiasms’. And so on and so forth – but all are clearly *meant*. For me, as guest-editor of this issue – itself an honour and a pleasure – the true index of the depth of affection and regard John inspires has been the fact that 98% of all the contributions were on my desk by the copy-date – an unheard-of thing!

Aside from the personal debts of gratitude we all owe him, it is the range and diversity of John’s ‘infectious enthusiasms’, his energy and productivity (my correspondents were plainly flabbergasted by this), which strike almost all who have had anything to do with him over the years. Let me list the main areas of his activity (in no particular order – I will return to the question of their ordering): son, husband and father; poet; jazz cornetist; publisher; editor; scholar; critic; cricketer; profes-

sor of English. Taking as read his life as a caring family man, and then considering how to put these roles in pecking order – well, that is precisely where the problem lies. If I were to rank-order them, John would almost certainly object whichever way round they were placed (although I would hazard a guess that, despite his excellence and conscientiousness as head of department, researcher and teacher, ‘professor of English’ would never be first!) The ‘remarkable’ thing about John is that he does all these things with a similar degree of energy and commitment, and they are genuinely roles which are in a kind of undifferentiated continuum: he is all those things simultaneously. ‘How does he do it?’: he once described his diurnal philosophy to me thus: ‘Up early; one’s own writing in the morning; a couple of pints at lunchtime to lubricate the afternoon’s teaching; cricket/jazz/theatre/pub in the evening; bit more writing before bed’. See – it’s easy! And in all of his activities, he is truly – to use a worn and sometimes dubious descriptor positively – ‘his own man’. Shakespeare (of course) put it better: ‘a plain, blunt man,/That loved my friend’. And therein lies the nub: in all his various activities, it is John’s capacity for friendship – loyal and long-lasting, supportive and encouraging, generous and affectionate – that the present volume bears testimony to. Everyone invited – and I fear many who were not – *wanted* to be included, often putting aside other urgent projects to provide their piece.

My own debt to John, as I thought back over the years – and despite long periods when we were barely in touch – surprised me by its extent and diversity. I mention it here, partly in gratitude and partly because, in its own way, I am sure it replicates, and will be recognisable to, his many other friends and debtors. As a young lecturer at Nottingham University in the mid-1960s, he persuaded me (then a postgraduate student) and Hugh Underhill (represented twice here) to produce a fortnightly broadsheet called *Poetry Programme* which published student and staff poetry. Run off on one of those old ‘cyclostyle’ machines which featured mauve stencils smelling enticingly of alcohol, and costing 3d, it became the focus of equally alcohol-fuelled discussions in the bar or pub immediately after each issue appeared and where one’s deathless (lifeless?) outpourings were subjected to withering, and occasionally laudatory, criticism by all and sundry. We cut our teeth there. That publication, unbelievably, ran from 1965 to 1977 – the whole of John’s time at Nottingham University. His own contributions sometimes appeared under the *nom de plume* ‘Thorn Gruin’ – an undergraduate journalist’s misprision for

Thom Gunn in a published interview with John, and a ‘mask’ he still occasionally grins from behind. Later, he published my second ever critical essay (on the entire C.P. Snow *Strangers and Brothers* novel-sequence – what a full, rich life I must have been leading at that point!) in *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, a university-based journal that John rescued from the dry-as-dust doldrums. Later still, he invited me to give my first ‘visiting-lecturer’ talk at Nottingham – an occasion on which I was so nervous that I convinced myself a belch, lurking about throat-high, was going to erupt the moment I opened my mouth to speak. He was one of our first external examiners at the then Thames Polytechnic – firm, generous and not given to over-examining, nor to suffering gladly the fools we all seem to become in exam boards. He was a founding editorial adviser to *Literature and History*, the journal we started at Thames in the mid-1970s, and also one its most ferocious reviewers – to such a point that when the reviews editor asked him to cool it down a bit for fear of losing subscribers, John said that it was his firm belief that if reviewing served any purpose at all it was to purge the world of specious rubbish. He caused me to read, and then write about, Patrick Hamilton when almost no one else was doing so, and published the results (recently, he also got me to introduce one of Hamilton’s least-read novels in the ‘Trent Editions’ series he has founded with colleagues at the Nottingham Trent University). I know that he does not really like what I have to say about Thomas Hardy, on either his fiction or his poetry: he’s polite, but, as always with John, you somehow *know* that for him you’re barking up the wrong tree. No longer (if ever) a poet, nor a cricketer (if ever), and with the ability only to play the gramophone (remember those?) as a musical instrument, I have never called upon John to help me in these directions. But I’m sure that if I wrote to him one day, and said: ‘Look, John, I’ve had this great idea for an ode in alexandrines, with cornet obbligato, celebrating the rules for lbw dismissal, and I need some advice ...’, he would send me a note (from Beeston, Athens or Hobart – old typewriter, unreadable manuscript corrections) saying he’d be glad to be of assistance – ‘Best, John’.



John Lucas was born in 1937 in Exeter (his mother, in her early nineties, is still alive; his father, of similar age, has only recently died). The family moved to the village of Burbage, near Hinckley, at

the outbreak of war while his father served in the army; then, in 1947, they moved to Ashford in Middlesex, his father becoming a salesman in the difficult post-war days and thereafter was employed, rather more prosperously, in the wood trade. John went to The Hampton School, Twickenham, on a special scholarship, a school which, characteristically, he did not rate – apart from registering the influence of two ‘great teachers’: one (John realised later), a marxist historian who taught history ‘from below’; the other, a geographer whose special interest was geo-politics. Because he wanted to play jazz, and art schools were the only places in tertiary education where that was likely to be possible in the mid-1950s, John enrolled briefly at St Martin’s in 1955-6, learning jazz but rapidly realising that art college was not for him. In the summer of 1956 (14 July, to be precise – John does not pause in remembering the date), he experienced an epiphany: he heard E. P. Thompson and Joan Littlewood speak at a big Bastille Day celebration in St Pancras Town Hall. Having already read some William Morris and R. H. Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (two lasting influences and heroes), a third was added: E. P. Thompson, the great socialist historian of the English working class. What was revealed to John on that occasion was that art and politics could be combined; that art could emerge from the apparently most unpropitious of circumstances; and that it was not necessary to toe dogmatic partisan lines. Already, in his own words, a ‘committed Marxist’, albeit a ‘humanist Marxist’, his life and work henceforth were to be indelibly inscribed with those values and stances.

John went to Reading University in the autumn of 1956 to read economics and social psychology, but soon realised that the kind of economics taught there at that time was not for him. He transferred to joint honours in English and Philosophy (while still managing to attend social psychology lectures [see Pauline Lucas’s ‘personalialia’ piece on Reading in those days]), and was immediately overwhelmed by the presence of D. J. Gordon, the professor of English. Gordon was lecturing on Jane Austen at that point, but what John took from him was the importance of really knowing a writer’s work inside out. It was a lesson in the importance of *knowledge*, which has again remained with John as the fundamental principle on which academic professionalism should rest. Other new friends and influences included Ian Fletcher and John Wain, both then lecturers and poets at Reading, Carl Pidgeon, John Goode, David Howard and Peter Mendes – the so-called ‘Reading Mafia’, occupants of ‘The Flat’ (of

whose doings Pidgeon writes in his ‘personalialia’ piece). But at the same time (late 1956), and most significantly, John – his own words – ‘first saw’ Pauline: the beginning of a life-long relationship and cultural partnership which continues to stand them both in good stead.

John graduated with a double-starred First (itself a Reading first) in English and Philosophy, and then went on to do a PhD on the work, life and times of W. H. Mallock, which effectively allowed him to focus on late-nineteenth-century history of ideas. In the second year of his research (1961), he was made an Assistant Lecturer, and based on the untold riches of a salary worth £937 p.a. (John remembers the figure precisely – ‘apart from a few pence probably’), he and Pauline felt able to make honest persons of themselves (they had, for the prurient reader, been ‘living in sin’, as it was known in those far-off, forever-summer days when policemen looked old). They were married the same year (Ben, their son, was later born in Reading), and moved to Nottingham in 1964 when John got his lectureship at the university (their daughter, Emma, was born in Nottingham). John and Pauline continue to live there (a number of ‘personalialia’ recall the ‘Nottingham Years’).

In 1977, John became Professor of English at Loughborough University, where he laboured long and hard to make a fine outfit of the English and Drama Department. Lest I have given the impression earlier that John underrates his institutional position as a professor, let it be clearly on the record that while at Loughborough, in addition to being Head of Department (and twice Dean of Faculty), he rarely did less than ten hours teaching a week and frequently more; (in a recent letter, he adds characteristically that ‘until the offensive lunacy of “Aims and Objectives” poisoned what teaching undergraduates ought to be, I loved all forms and levels of teaching’). In addition, in the course of his career he has successfully supervised some 40 PhDs and a smattering of MPhils (however, one Loughborough ‘personalialia’ reveals that it was not all work and no play). He retired from that post in 1996, a year before he was sixty, and took up the half-time Research Professorship at Nottingham Trent University which he currently holds. But in the course of his professional life, and despite his own brand of ‘Englishness’, John has never been parochial. He and his family spent 1967-8 in the States, where he was visiting professor at the Universities of Maryland and Indiana; in 1984-5, John and Pauline were in Greece, where he was Lord Byron Visiting Professor of English Literature at the University of Athens; they were in Melbourne for two months in 1992, where John was a Visiting Fellow;

and three months in 1993 in Launceston, Tasmania, when he was Writer in Residence at the university. John and Pauline have a long lease on a flat on Aegina Island, Greece, where they spend many happy hours with Greek friends and English visitors. Note how they have only adopted as second homes places where the wine is superb.



This special issue of *Critical Survey* came into being when Marion Shaw, also professor of English at Loughborough University, wanted to pay a tribute to John's herculean and formative work for the Department there on his retirement and free transfer to Nottingham Trent. She asked me if I would edit some kind of celebratory volume for him. It soon dawned on us that, as a long-standing and successful poetry editor of *Critical Survey*, the appropriate course of action was to suggest a guest-edited issue of the journal entirely devoted to people and topics close to John's heart. The in-house editors were enthusiastic, and at a Le-Carré-like meeting at Newport Pagnell Services on the M1 (intellectual espionage is rife these RAE days), the nature of the volume was established.

It was to have a 'theme' – 'Poetry in English c.1800 to the Present' – and was to include three sections: essays, poems, and what Marion Shaw (talented word-forgers, she and I) christened 'personalia' – 300-word reminiscences about John. Lists of possible contributors were drawn up (a real difficulty, since there were so many candidates to choose from whom John might expect to see there, and since the issue could not run to several volumes). These had then to be distributed across the sections in a way that made sense and hopefully would not miff anybody. The critical essays needed to be about poets who were in John's preferred personal pantheon or on areas of poetry in which he had a direct interest, and if we were to have a reasonable spread, each one could only be 3000-words long. The essays appear here in roughly chronological order of the poets considered. The contemporary poets solicited for a poem – with a little tactful help from John himself – more or less selected themselves, and their poems, a concise anthology of poetry in English today, are arranged in alphabetical order of authors' names. The 'personalia' cover various significant phases of John's life so far, or his main interests outside literature, and are roughly in the following order: Reading, Nottingham, Loughborough, Australia, cricket, jazz. Finally, there is a bibliography of all

John's published books to date. It is an impressive note to close on, and clearly establishes that he is not just a good friend to very many people, not just a funky cornet player and a cricketing allround(er)man, but also a highly productive and original voice in poetry and criticism in the second half of the twentieth century.

In his work, as in his wider life, John has also been and is 'his own man'. There is a touch of 'the free-born Englishman' about everything he does, most obviously in his passionate resistance to contamination by fashionable '-isms'. A life-long socialist, he has remained deeply sceptical of the newer marxisms of the post-1968 period, and his Thompsonian suspicion of 'Theory' (poverty of) has led to fiery rebuttals of what he sees as its wilder excesses (occasionally, I believe, to sound a solitary negative note, to the detriment of his own work). But as we know, vices and virtues are part and parcel of one another, and John's fierce independence of mind and stance are the bedrock on which his teaching and criticism, if nothing else, solidly rests. The titles – and, of course, the content – of such books as *The 1930s: a Challenge to Orthodoxy*, *Writing and Radicalism* and *The Radical Twenties* signal the cast of mind and the stance. John has consistently, from his very earliest works, sought to challenge orthodoxy, to promote the radical. He has done this in a number of ways: first, by highlighting the importance of writers whom conventional literary studies have ignored or side-lined, and who were often themselves radical in thought and action (hence, no doubt, their occlusion): one thinks immediately of his promotion of Mark Rutherford, W. H. Mallock, George Crabbe, Oliver Goldsmith, Robert Bloomfield, Patrick Hamilton, and, of course, John Clare – of the 'contesting voices' (his phrase) of non-conformist eighteenth-century poets, of post-first-world-war women writers, of disregarded modern poets. Secondly, he has always foregrounded the historical and political contexts of the writing he is considering – from early collections like *Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* and *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, through *The Literature of Change*, the books on romantic and modern writing, on 'Englishness' and on modern English poetry, down to his most recent, and major, revision of literary history, *The Radical Twenties* – published significantly by a small radical press in Nottingham, and not by a 'big' commercial publisher. This is a tour-de-force in itself: 'an attempt', as the Preface states, 'to shift attention away from accounts which for too long have been accepted as definitive'; to recast the

decade as lived by ‘the millions who could not be Bright Young people ... and for whom the post-war years meant something very different from the Jazz Age’. Typically, this leads John to focus on writers who ‘allow those who cannot be spoken of to speak for themselves. This is a radical ambition’. Indeed – both theirs and his. Thirdly, he has re-visited favourite major novelists – in particular, in monographs on Dickens (too much criticism around for John’s taste) and Arnold Bennett (not enough), and in individual essays (on Thomas Hardy, for example: too much once more). These represent an attempt to rescue such writers from their particular critical plights, and to recast them in the shape in which John wishes them to be read and appreciated. One unfortunate reflex of giving the present ‘special issue’ its particular focus, therefore, is that we have had to omit any essays on the novelists John most admires (those above, together with Rutherford, Hamilton, Storm Jameson, Julian Barnes, Philip Callow, Michael Wilding – the last two represented here in other ways, however). But the scale and range of John’s interests meant that something, sadly, had to go.

A fourth dimension of John’s recuperative project of getting into print writing – and especially contemporary poetry – which he believes deserves public recognition and is unjustly little-known, has been his continual creation of small presses. Long ago, he established the Reading University Press; he initiated, and then ran – between 1966 and 1978 – The Byron Press at Nottingham University (with Allan Rodway, and then George Parfitt), which published seven full volumes of poetry and fifteen smaller ones; he set up Shoestring Press (not *The*) in 1994 from his home in Beeston, which has so far published 40 collections (Pauline designs the covers), including important volumes of Greek poetry in translation and work by contemporary Australian poets – hence giving the lie to any sense that ‘Englishness’ in John’s case means ‘little-Englishness’. He also helped to start, and now advises on, the ‘Trent Editions’ series from Nottingham Trent University (a follow-up, in some respects, to the abruptly-curtailed Merlin Press Radical Reprint series), which again reprints comprehensively ‘forgotten’ literary works that someone somewhere nevertheless still believes in (someone somewhere being then recruited to provide a helpful modern introduction to their chosen text). In addition, and as part of his truly *grounded* Englishness, John has edited/written/caused-to-be-published works with a distinctly regional character – especially from within and about Nottinghamshire

and Leicestershire (including paeans to local cricketing heroes). All of which activities do indeed offer ‘a challenge to orthodoxy’.

Poetry, of course, is John’s great love – both composing it and admiring (and sometimes not) the work of other poets. He has reviewed poetry in most journals, but is especially proud of his ten-year stint as poetry reviewer for the *New Statesman*, and also of his general editorship of the Faber series of Student Guides/Critical Monographs, which included major volumes on Edward Thomas, Seamus Heaney, Keith Douglas and Louis MacNeice. Of his favourite poets, he cites, among contemporaries not included in the present volume, George Szirtes, Paul Muldoon and Derek Mahon; but will quickly add: ‘although don’t let’s forget the Elizabethans, especially George Gascoigne, and George Herbert, of course, the quintessential, pure poet – I love him’. John’s own work, diverse, witty, and always meticulously crafted, celebrates, amongst many other things, ‘eccentricity’ (an important word in his vocabulary of radicalism and challenge) – in jazz men and women, for example, or in the kinds of people who populate Dickens’ or Hamilton’s novels: characters who cannot be explained by a sociologist. But he also writes tender, delicate poems to his family – and especially Pauline:

So, love, here’s health! That after those hard years
our tree still lives, no longer shapely (shears
have seen to that), but stubbornly well-set
and fit to last out many winters yet.

(‘Cheers’, *One for the Piano*, 1997)



And so John works on – also for ‘many winters yet’, we all devoutly hope. He is writing, once more characteristically, a biography of his grandfather, who was a junior-school head-teacher and, John has discovered, a socialist; he is working on a critical study of Ivor Gurney – another potentially ‘eccentric’ and, until recently, loftily disregarded figure (but a ‘true poet’ to John); and he plans further work on other writers, especially in the nineteenth century, who display – in his own telling phrase – ‘the radical imagination’. Resistant to what he describes as ‘a gathering, a new orthodoxy’ of ideas amongst intellectuals in the early 1980s, and a retreat into the academy – combined with a related ‘coralling of language’ which closes out the energy derived from the exchanges endemic to people’s day-to-day lives

(their ‘politics’, if you like) – John has moved back to jazz (see Barry Cole’s poem here, ‘For a Cornet Player, Retired’ and its subscript note) in order to be among ‘extraordinary’ people who are the very antithesis of ‘academics’.

Well, good on yer, John, and may Burgundy Street be long and on the sunny side. We all wish you well (‘the Great Good Guy’, as one of my new-found correspondents calls you), and Pauline, of course, and all of yours, in a future devoted to infusing the ‘radical imagination’ throughout your ‘infectious enthusiasms’ (including modern cricket?). As Thorn Gruin learnt early (and put it better than you could, I dare say), there’s

this triple-headed truth:
not to be afraid of dreams, laughter or men.
He tries to live now by what you taught him then.
(‘Thorn’s Thank you Poem’, *One for the Piano*, 1997)

Cheltenham