

## **Dr David Faber, Historian & Poet: Books in My Life-An Annotated List.**

I was born, after a long and difficult labour, to a 'fallen' teen in a Salvo baby farm in Hobart on the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> of October, 1959. Labour had begun the previous day, the experience spanning the anniversary of the defeat of good king Harold by William the Bastard and the first day of the Norman Yoke.

It needs to be remembered that there are two kinds of Baby Boomer: war children who experienced the prosperity of the Long Boom; and those who were subjected to the tender mercies of the Long Recession and the deliberate return of mass unemployment and tertiary student fees. I was born just in time to vicariously experience the Vietnam War and encounter the darkness of Thatcherite Neo-liberalism. Tertiary fees were grandfathered, however, and so I escaped them, under the Whitlam dispensation, as was only right and proper.

While personal and professional adversity have dogged my achievements, mine has been a fortunate life; I could have been born on a Manila rubbish heap, and not had an intellectual career at all. It has been increasingly guided by a principled Machiavellianism, reminiscent of the doggedness of the noir detective, a species of hard-boiled optimism, disabused about the flaws in human nature. As the 'Stones sing in these scoundrel times, 'You think the party's over/ but it's only just begun/ So raise a glass/ get up and dance/ 'cause life is only hit/ and hit and run.'

Books have been my lifeline, my window of meaning in an uphill battle. I was taught to read firstly by my adoptive mother on Disney **Little Golden Books**, featuring to my mind the hilariously irascible Donald Duck, but I don't remember this; I only know of it because they remained around the house as I grew up. I do remember my adoptive Nanna holding me in her arms, reading with me a reverend gentleman's **The Bible in Pictures**, a process dating back to before the English Revolution. A clue that I have never suffered body dysmorphia is that I used to sneak out of bed in the early morning to gaze in rapture on the figure of Eve getting conned by the snake. I wondered how God could view knowledge so negatively. I benefitted too from my father's bedtime readings of **Uncle Remus** stories, my favourite being 'Brer Rabbitt & the Tar Baby'. I admired the resourceful critter's practical survival skills in extremis.

I came down with a passion for history at age 5. I had a boyhood fascination with the drama of it all, and its predominant colour, red. An early interest in pirates evolved in primary school into an identification with wild colonial boys, an evident channelling of my covert inner rebel. A schoolroom copy of Prior, Wannan & Nunn's **A Pictorial History of Bushrangers**, fuelled my interest, particularly in the vandemonian Mathew Brady and Ned Kelly.

By then, my historical passion had been noticed early by my Uncle, 'Digger' Neil Duncombe, who handed me on the sunny steps of his home an A-3 monochrome graphic treatment of the Anzac tragedy. There were veterans in the district, but this narrative opened my eyes to the epic of the national Iliad (of which Greek epic I had yet to hear). My father embellished it with an account of the fatal charge of the Light Horse at the Nek. Some of my people's history might have happened elsewhere, in the military big league, but it was astonishingly ours.

At 8 I requested of my father permission to march in Burnie for the Moratorium. I wanted to weaponize my cub uniform for critical, persuasive social credibility, an early politic intuition. Although his table talk was strongly against the war, he asked me to consider if I would ever get a job if ASIO took my photo. I could see he was concerned for me, and didn't want him to worry. It needs to be remembered that the years of the Long Boom were also those of Menzies and the 1<sup>st</sup> Cold War. And as Lenny Bruce said, 'if you're not paranoid, you're not paying attention'. In compensation I took up conversing politically with anyone, child or adult, whom I could constrain to listen, whether they liked it and agreed with me or not. As my vade mecum, I employed a tertiary sector-produced pamphlet, modelled on American campus teach-ins. It concluded with the ringing truth, 'ideas should lead to action'. In due course, this became a watchword of my subsequent historical practice.

I was affectively vulnerable as an infant with prodromal Manic-Depressive Illness. It presented early in a lack of confidence, despite my apparent intelligence, and as a little anxiety and social uncertainty. I couldn't comprehend that it was sufficient in playground argy-bargy to hold your own. I had to go one better and fire a risposte over the head of my antagonist. This merely earned me the offer of a bunch of fives from the school bully. He might not have understood what I said, but he knew what I meant, and didn't care for it. As I was a relatively quiet and cooperative little boy, nobody much noticed my timorousness, besides my father. He confided in me that I had a certain tendency to drop my bundle. I knew he was right. This was a depressive symptom in a melancholy child. The first literary sign of this was my risky fascination with **Tales of Mystery & Imagination** by the talented American manic-depressive, Edgar Allen Poe. I still remember the title of one short story in that collection, *A Cask of Amontilado*. It thrilled me into a couple of nightmares. I was to later notice a moody fascination with modernist literary melancholics, like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, feeling attracted to their atmospherics, not to mention unwittingly sharing some of their symptoms, like hypersexuality.

Born with keen wits and barely a motor skill to my name, my socialisation in the Aussie Rules district of Burnie was troubled. In retreat from tough love mothering and the school yard, I 'always had my head in a book', as often as not an historical novel. One I read in infancy on the schoolhouse steps was Rosemary Sutcliffe's **Knight's Fee**, about the military basis of the feudal system. This fascination with chivalry drove me to **Froisart's Chronicles**,

a classic of medieval historiography, an extra-curricular read in first year high, I seem to recall.

In year 8 our English teacher introduced us to public speaking and debating. A convinced teenage Whitlamite, I found in the Burnie High Library Geoffrey Dutton's **Republican Australia?** illustrated by Bruce Petty, then resident at The Australian! I learned from it that NSW Governor Sir Phillip Game had constitutionally dismissed Jack Lang during the Great Depression. I argued, in effect, once bitten twice shy, that what happened once could happen again. In a speech ironically entitled, 'It Can't Happen Here', I argued for removal of the vice-royal power to dismiss elected Australian governments. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings....

In rapid succession I became the only State school member of The Tasmanian Schools' Debating Team, Youth Premier, and champion boy orator in the Youth Speaks for Australia contest. At the Canberra National Finals, I reprised my State-title speech, with a philippic, an all-out verbal assault, against Sir John Kerr for not having received the Speaker in 1975. His son got married that day in Sydney, so he wasn't there to hear me. I have always hoped this snub of mine had something to do with that scheduling.

Meanwhile, cooler kids than I affected reading the bourgeois bohemian idealist Hermann Hesse, (**Steppenwolf**, **Siddartha**, and the turgid, Nobel Prize winning platonic tome **The Glass Bead Game**). The American humourist Kurt Vonnegut (**Mother Night**, **Slaughterhouse Five** and **Breakfast of Champions**) insightfully analysed this literature as pandering to childish notions of superpowers (of the mystery achievement mystical kind, of course). I just had to tug the forelock and keep up with my social betters.

Like most bright young things, I read **The Communist Manifesto** at age 15. The 'historical materialism' of Marx was very impressive, but a bit beyond me at that age. What I took away from it at first reading was that, if I played my cards right, I too could be a class traitor, like Marx himself, and my heroes Gough Whitlam and Don Dunstan. And in a widdershins way, so I did. My fascination with the notion of 'revolution' was such, that I even ached to read the Irish rogue and paid counter-revolutionary, Edmund Burke, a man who lacked no insight, just integrity.

In the latter years of my Tasmanian youth, I was a camp follower of the rising young politician Michael Field, whose generational credentials and personal attributes caused me to rightly predict that he would make Premier. In his library I read **Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee**, which confirmed my sympathy for the Amerindians. I was also influenced from his bookshelf by C. Wright Mill's progressive, **The Sociological Imagination**.

With options at the University of Tasmania and ANU, I chose to attend the University of Adelaide, having friends from an earlier stay in the city. I was a beneficiary of the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme, enabling regular trips to and from my native Tasmania during the Rivers crisis. A speech I gave on the Barr Smith Lawns in 1980 was reported in **On dit** as being from 'the speaker from Tasmania with the small card manifesto'. I argued that Tasmania's Keynesian dilemma needed to be appreciated if the rivers were not to be dammed by the Tories the day before yesterday. The ALP was the only mainstream Tasmanian institution giving the environmentalists a hearing.

Unfortunately, sociology at Adelaide did not prove progressive, what was worse, reminded me of the spoon feeding I had endured at High School. Meandering as lonely as a cloud amongst the stacks one day, I was transfixed by the long, Latin-based English of the Absolutist philosopher Thomas Hobbes. I transferred forthwith to a course in political philosophy. I was awarded the job of treating of John Stuart Mill's Liberal essay, **On Liberty**. A young Miss from Milan who caught my eye volunteered to comment on Machiavelli, another writer whom I had precociously read a little before I could understand him, but I had realized that I shared his passion for politics. I refused to be charmed by the bourgeoisie individualism of Mill, which misunderstood and suppressed, I argued, majority individuality.

Unbeknowns to me, this caught the Milanesina's eye. Shortly thereafter, she nervously delivered her paper on the proto-patriot Machiavelli. When the tutor insisted conventionally, Penguin translation in hand, that the Florentine had argued that 'the end justifies the means', she defiantly retorted 'It's a bad translation!' The tutor rocked back in his chair, saying 'Well, this is scholarship!'. I was even more impressed; I married her!

Within a year my undiagnosed condition was giving me grief. In an attempt to engage professional assistance, I bypassed the varsity medical service which could have helped me and fetched up in the Counselling Service! Wasn't my problem 'mental'? It was I who divined the best existential bibliotherapy (so called 'self-help' books be damned), reading a 19<sup>th</sup> century European military classic **On War**, by the boy soldier cum staff officer cum philosopher Carl von Clausewitz. It did fit me for life and death struggle, in a way which 'psychotherapy' never did.

Eventually, my undiagnosed disorder undermined my Honours Year. Reporting to my Supervisor that I risked being failed for ill health, he replied rhetorically, 'What would the degree be worth if we didn't fail somebody?' Disgusted, I emigrated with my Italian wife to her native Milan, but returned after 3 years because it is a hard city in which to be working poor. By this time, I had made a new start, with an Italo-Australian research topic I have carried forward for forty years, and am prosecuting to monographic completion on Gramscian labour history lines.

*Here endeth the tale of the undergraduate readings that made me. In preparing for a Tuesday Talk at the State Library, I noticed how much poetry had influenced me, saving me from suicide and preparing me for the acquisition of my own verse voice. But that is another story....*