

“O Brother Where Art Thou?”

Stephen Oliver

My early schooldays as a student at Marist Brothers Newtown, Wellington (a kind of transit camp Catholic schoolboys were subjected to, before progressing inevitably onto St Patricks College) were troubling enough. A number of these brothers had an effect and influence measured in varying degrees according to the force and imposition of their personalities, rather than any ability to impart knowledge or learning. Except of course, for Miss Dobson, but more of her in a moment. There was Brother Henry who took a particular interest in me expressed in flattery more than anything else. Though what physical looks I may have had, or whether my eyes were a green or blue colour, I could not quite see the relevance of as far as my education was concerned. Maybe this was a lesson in acquiring self-confidence. Brother Henry, in his ‘civilian days’ had worked as an ambulance driver. He, too, fell foul of the Head honcho, Brother Paulinus, and I liked him because he didn’t kowtow to the Paulinus bullying technique. He stood his ground fearlessly and was hated by the formidable Brother Paulinus. Brother Henry would in the end leave the order, marry and raise a family. When in doubt, procreate. There was one particular lay teacher, an Englishman named Pringle - a swinish, sadistic individual who got great satisfaction from literally flogging boys with the cane for minor misdemeanours, and at the slightest provocation - often he would schedule these occasions to take place in the lay teachers office as lunch time entertainment for one or two other teacher-spectators - particularly, the emerging thespian, the now late Mr Jonathan Hardy. They worked this routine in tandem like a dirty little secret.

One middle-aged brother took a singular delight in dandling boys on his knee in the classroom. Boys would talk of how he would stroke the boys’ thighs, but I don’t think much came of it. Brother Roberts took us for history (though it was not uncommon for teachers to interchange subjects such was the general application of knowledge) and he was a no-nonsense individual with slicked back black hair and horn-rimmed spectacles with a rectangle shorn out from the hairline. Whether this ever grew back I can’t recall. It made him look rather vampirish. You knew this man possessed incontestable strength both of manner and physique. A distant figure.

Notwithstanding, they all robustly caned the living bejesus out of us in turn. Even Brother Felix, the Fijian, who giggled like a drag queen and took to calling me 'orotund'. But for the most part, Brother Felix was a gentle and harmlessly coquettish individual though displayed more a temperamental anger when caning boys (across the finger tips) that was strangely un-masculine.

Peripherally, Brother John (he didn't teach me) always appeared quietly tortured in a vainglorious way who was, apparently, renowned as a fine middle distance runner, though he took inordinate pride in his 'stylish' running technique. Rather mincing, I thought, though the moms liked it. On sports day we could observe him in action when it came to the Brother racing Brother *heats*. Brother Henry proved to be a speedy 100-yard contender and invariably won - in fact, beat Brother John who didn't take defeat well though his silky black hair (that flick of the front lock) remained in place. He too eventually disappeared from the order, and was rumoured at the time to have had either a tantrum or a tearful breakdown at school. He was what my mother would have termed, 'a sensitive young man - without a vocation.'

Even then I was not the most academically attuned pupil (and was never destined to be one) and possessed little self-confidence. My reading ability was barely average. Miss Dobson was the only true teacher I had during those primary school years and she took a special interest in my case both in and out of school. I had on occasion to visit her home, and was more than willing to, for additional instruction in reading techniques. 'Remedial reading' was the official term. Under her patient care and understanding, devoid of any of the egotistical high jinx associated with the other teachers, I made huge advances in learning, and in the enjoyment of the process.

There was no negative criticism here, simply a real and sincere concern for the well being of a student. As a result of her instruction I eventually won an end of year school prize (sneered at by my eldest brother) for 'the most improved in the class'. The award so dedicated and inscribed was a book called - *Black Beauty*. In any day or age, Miss Dobson, who had taught for many years, would be regarded and celebrated as a true teacher. She harboured no careerist ambitions nor private agendas. Her only interest lay in sincerely helping and getting the best out of her students without the slightest hint of dishonesty or coercion. She never once had recourse to physical and psychological abuse to get 'quick' results.

The only other woman on staff was the music teacher, Miss O'Shea. Miss O'Shea had a severe neurological disorder that may have been cerebral palsy in part. But on the other hand, it may have been something akin to *Tourette Syndrome*. Twitchings and little muscular convulsions of the neck and arms, even cursing! Angst ridden facial contortions. Whatever nervous disorder afflicted her she was what one used to call 'highly strung' but she was a brilliant musical teacher and created one of the finest school choirs in the history of Marist Brothers, Newtown. I was in that choir and we were the toast of the town. Neurotic though she was, Miss O'Shea's (she appeared tremulously in awe of Br. Paulinus) one driving ambition was to create the best possible male boys choir in the city, and she did it. All through her tantrums and tears, Brother Paulinus acted as her personal guardian and would not tolerate any form of misbehaviour on behalf of the boys. This was the only occasion I saw him act tenderly or protectively toward anyone. We were to commit ourselves wholly, body and soul, just like Miss O'Shea - and so we did.

The choir after months of practice came gloriously into its own at the end of year festival before we 'broke up' for the longed for Christmas holidays, which ran for about eight weeks. We sang in multiple harmonies though there was a male lead called Stephen Keith who did long solos in the best *ViennaBoys Choir* tradition, and that was what she was aiming for. A few of the numbers were the standard Catholic hits like: "The Song of St. Bernadette", "Ave Maria", good old favourites like, "Silent Night" and a song with lyrics that went, '*Set mid a scene of courtly pomp, dim in the mists of longago, courtiers perform their stately dance, with measured step and slow...*' and oddly, "The White Horse Inn" (Harry Secombe's signature tune, though he was more famously known as *Neddy* of 'The Goon Show'.) This was Miss O'Shea's night of nights and her great triumph. This too, was the only time she wore lipstick and make up (badly) and something like a white starched dress with a floral pattern of roses. We had two years of her instruction and then she suddenly left, mid-term, unannounced, and without warning. It didn't take long for the choir to deteriorate under the temporary, replacement baton-cum-cane of Brother Paulinus (there was no one else to replace her, certainly not of her calibre - though a disgruntled Brother Felix eventually took over) with all his usual frustration, impatience and anger.

I learnt that Miss O'Shea had taken off to the UK and then completely disappeared. She was in fact, subsequently reported missing; discovered some months later, wandering the streets of London, incoherently babbling to herself, head shaven bald as a Buddhist monk. Where she had been, and what she had done during her Agatha Christie spell of amnesia, no one knew, least of all Miss O'Shea. She had suffered a psychotic episode, complete nervous breakdown. The woman was a perfectionist and ultimately could not sustain the expectations or high standards she set herself. I never discovered what became of her after her failed bid for greater musical success in the UK. She did return to New Zealand, but to what fate I do not know, though she never returned to Marist Brothers, in Tasman Street, Newtown.

In that wedge of hill and gully between Ohiro and Brooklyn Roads on the western slopes steeply falling away to Aro Street and the city beneath - *Central Park*, with its network of root-bound dirt tracks, its canopies of towering pine, eucalypt and macrocarpa, the upper slopes planted in Rhododendrons coral-pink and azaleas ribbon-red skirting Brooklyn Road, extended haphazardly down over the hill and opened out onto a flat space with a few battered swings, suspended chains from bars with hoops, a lop-sided carousel, constructed out of heavy planked timber, faded green, and a square weather-board council building painted a dirty white with wire-meshed opaque windows.

Brooklyn Road bounded one side with the Central Park Tennis Courts (a venue for international celebrity matches - *Charlton 'Chuck' Heston* was one of those who sauntered onto the courts resplendent in his white cottons toward the end of the '50s, and this too, is where the world famous, *Globe Trotters* came to strut their stuff) diagonally opposite the sub-station, while on the other, lower level of the park a white, narrow wooden bridge on high concrete pillars and arch connected the dirt tracks of the wilderness onto gravel paths alongside dull shrubbery beds that lead down to the ineffectual wall fountain (slimed grotto) that dribbled from a little basin into a semi-circular collecting pool beneath it.

Here. the main entrance came out at the bottom of Brooklyn Road, around Nairn Street, with its row of run down, identical houses on the rise known as the ‘three sisters’ (there used to be five up until the mid ‘50s) and finally, joined onto upper Willis Street that continued down into the central business district. Central Park offered me a suspension in time within its moody confines, especially under the two girdered, buzzing pylons on rising knolls that contributed to the wild, abandoned aspect. I walked up and down through this largely forgotten and unruly section of the town belt all through my secondary school days, Wellington and harbour with *Somes Island*, a faded brown in the middle distance, spread before me in the mornings and behind me in the afternoons as I trudged back up into the Brooklyn hills.

Stephen Oliver is the author of 17 volumes of poetry. Travelled extensively. Signed on with the radio ship *The Voice of Peace* broadcasting in the Mediterranean out of Jaffa, Israel. Freelanced in Australia/New Zealand as *production voice, narrator, newsreader, radio producer, columnist, copy and feature writer, etc.* Lived in Australia for the last two decades. Currently living in NZ. His latest volume, *Intercolonial*, a book length narrative poem, published by Puriri Press, Auckland, NZ (2013). *A transtasman epic.* His work has been translated into German, Spanish, Chinese and Dutch. Recent work has appeared in: *Contrappasso* (Australia); *Landfall* (NZ); *London Grip* (UK); *Plumwood Mountain* (Australia); *The Innisfree Poetry Journal 20* (Ireland); *Southerly* (Australia); etc. *Forthcoming*: poetry in *Ghost Fishing: An Eco-Justice Poetry Anthology*, edited by Melissa Tuckey, University of Georgia Press, 2016. This piece is taken from an unpublished memoir titled, *The River Runs Backwards*. Various chapters, however, have appeared in *Antipodes: A Global Journal of Australian and New Zealand Literature*, and elsewhere.