



THE BALLAD OF CHANGI CHIMES

(The day after most of the Australians left Changi camp for home the prison clock, of its own accord, began irresponsibly chiming.)

The clock on Changi's grey-walled tower
Went crazy overnight—
Its hands showed ten past two; its bell
Boomed in the evening light.

No ordinary range of chimes
By the bell that hour was rung,
But only after fifteen notes
Did silence grip its tongue.

Four years to the men in Changi Jail,
It rang "Lord, be my guide"—
To those enslaved a song of hope,
The knell of those who died.

Perhaps, like Lear, it snapped, insane
In one heartrending jangle,
And crazy weights like gallows men
Within its walls now dangle;

Or, maybe, learning that abroad
Peace by all bells was voiced,
It broke the laws of Time and Cog
And privately rejoiced.

VAL VALLIS (1916-2009)

Soldier, Sailor, Singer

PAUL SHERMAN REMEMBERS HIS OLD FRIEND, VAL VALLIS.

On Shakespeare's Birthday, 1956, Eunice Hanger, a co-lecturer with Val Vallis at The University of Queensland, directed me in the title role of *Coriolanus* on the stone steps of the Uni at St Lucia. Afterwards, Eunice gave a party in her office. She introduced me to Val, whom I'd never met before and whose poetry I had not then read. Gruffly, but jokingly, he said as he shook my hand, 'Oh, so you're the Core-ee-o-Ioinus.' It was a great send-up of my Aussie accent.

A couple of months later we were both on stage in the (now demolished) Albert Hall in the old Twelfth Night Theatre's production of *Macbeth*, directed by Eunice's friend Rhoda Felgate. Val, with reddened nose, fattened tummy, and brandishing keys and a kerosene lamp, was the jolliest Porter I've ever acted with. I started as Lennox, so it was Val's Porter who opened the door of *Macbeth's* castle to Macduff and me. Then (because our Banquo

Above:
Portrait of Val Vallis

Val Vallis's poem 'The
Ballad of Changi Chimes'

had to go to Adelaide to get married) our Malcolm was promoted to Banquo and I was promoted to Malcolm. So it was the Prince and the Porter for me and Val.

We soon became firm friends. Up at Mt Tamborine he introduced me to Judith Wright and soon, when I started teaching at Murgon State High School in 1958, I found myself teaching the poems of people I knew. During my four years in Murgon, Val visited the school and the town hall to give talks on Australian poetry for the Commonwealth Literary Fund. These talks took him as far as Mt Isa.

Val was a great traveller – the University of London (where he took his Doctorate of Philosophy), the University in Venice (where he was Australian writer-in-residence, hosted by Australia's Bernard Hickey) and even the Opera House in Chile, where he was a judge of an international opera competition, sitting beside the great Italian mezzo Fedora Barbieri.

But, as far as he travelled, Val's core was always Queensland, not so much Brisbane as the seaport of Gladstone where he grew up and where his father was a fisherman and a 'wharfie'.

At sea, Val relished the waters in and outside the port of Gladstone, though as a sailor on his family's boats, the *Valhalla* and the *Jean*, he was happy that his father (nicknamed 'Michael') and his brother Paddy had pride of place.

After high schooling in Rockhampton, Val worked as a clerk for the Gladstone Council before the war against Japan saw him in New Guinea at Milne Bay. He wasn't in the front line. He had time for his 'non-day' job – writing poetry. He was posting it to *The Bulletin* in Sydney, whose poetry editor was the great Doug Stewart. His 'Songs of the East Coast' (the opening lines of which can be read in his footpath-plaque near the corner of Adelaide and Albert Streets), written in New Guinea's Madang in 1944, achingly evokes the raw-salt reality and the mythic mystique of Gladstone, its harbour and its nearby hills that 'bite the blue skies'. That line I quote was used about six decades later for the opening exhibit of the Museum of Brisbane in the City Hall. When Japan surrendered, Val was posted to Singapore to help in the repatriation of prisoners from the notorious Changi Jail. While Val was there, a strange thing happened. In mid-afternoon the prison's bell started madly chiming for midnight and more –

... only after fifteen notes
Did silence grip its tongue

Val turned this bizarre event into a gripping ballad,

'Changi Chimes', which I find grabs school students today when I am asked to perform Australian poems on visits to schools. Moreover, an Italian school teacher, Aldo Magagnino, of Presicce, near Lecce in Southern Italy (the late Bernard Hickey was Professor of English in Lecce), has translated this and others of Val's poems into Italian. They are being published in the Italian magazine, *crocevia*.

Val's international impact was felt when he was an Australian opera critic for the London-published magazine, *Opera*. Three volumes of his own poetry have been published, plus essays for the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies. Last September, after he had left his Indooroopilly home for Sinnamon Village, he signed permission for two of his poems ('Mooring Buoy' and 'Shipwright') to be published in the *Penguin Anthology of Australian Verse*, 2009, edited by John Kinsella. This book is now published.

I regard one of Val's most significant works to have been his collaboration with Judith Wright and Ruth Harrison on the publication (by Angus and Robertson in 1970) of previously unpublished poems by John Shaw Nielson. Val hated literary pretentiousness. Thus he was a great admirer of the unacademic lyrical poetry of Shaw Nielson. I remember his great enthusiasm when he told me of a play with music by Darryl Emmerson (*The Pathfinder*) based on the life and poems of Nielson.

Val's enduring monument is the Arts Queensland annual Val Vallis prize, set up by then Arts Minister Matt Foley, for an emerging poet.

Val was survived by his sister, Mrs Topsy Hamilton, but sadly she also died recently. Topsy's daughter, Susan, is a prominent Professor and administrator at the University of Queensland.

As we are now in what is called Queensland's Sesquicentenary, it is worth recalling that in the Centenary Year, 1959, Val was co-editor (with RS Byrnes) of a monumental and vastly comprehensive anthology – the *Queensland Centenary Anthology*, which included poems, plays, short stories, essays and extracts from novels.

PAUL SHERMAN is a poet, actor and former high school teacher. Born in Brisbane and a University of Queensland graduate, he has acted in numerous Shakespearean plays. He has travelled widely, delivering lectures on Australian poetry, and his poems have been published in various anthologies and journals. At the 2008 Queensland Poetry Festival he read the poems of his friend, Val Vallis.