

Obituaries

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By Suzy Baldwin

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Once a plain death notice, the obituary has become an entertaining art form writes Suzy Baldwin.

"The death of Simon Raven, at the age of 73 after suffering a stroke, is proof that the devil looks after his own. He ought, by rights, to have died of shame at 30 or of drink at 50." The Guardian, May 16, 2001

Raven, who somehow managed to write 36 novels and numerous screenplays while being enthusiastically dissolute, indiscriminately priapic and perpetually thirsty, would have loved this obit. He would have relished the retelling of being booted out of his posh school for 'serial homosexuality', and of how he replied to his wife's telegram "Wife and baby starving send money soonest" with "Sorry no money suggest eat baby." He knew a good story when he made one.

However, the subject's imagined approval or disapproval is actually beside the point in writing about the dead. Sorry, but once you're dead, the interpretation of your life no longer belongs to you. And it is no longer considered bad form to speak ill of the dead, especially if they deserve it.

The 19th century was very po-faced about speaking ill of the dead. No newspaper then would have run any such information about Raven. In fact, they wouldn't have touched such a boulder with a barge pole. Newspaper obits then were allotted to the "top people" as The Times of London called its readers - aristocrats, archbishops, generals, judges and, in Australia, the NSW superintendent of buildings, who was given the first locally written obit in the Sydney Gazette on March 25, 1804. Their (inevitably male) lives were written as exemplars of behaviour. Any excesses or peculiarities of taste regarding women, boys or booze were tactfully overlooked.

The dead were not always pussyfooted around with such delicacy. In the 17th century, that glorious gossip John Aubrey breathed vigorous life into the departed by showing them in all their human idiosyncrasy in his Brief Lives. He observes, for example, that the great poet and playwright Ben Jonson "would be sure not to want [i.e. lack] wine; of which he usually took too much before he went to bed, if not oftner and sooner". And he obviously feels sympathy for the beautiful Countess of Sussex, "a great and sad example of the power of Lust and Slavery to it", who died of the pox after pursuing and sleeping with one of her servants, whom she knew to be infected but who had a "body of exquisite shape".

The modern obit owes a great deal to Aubrey. His brilliant conjuring of character through anecdote, description and detail provided the inspiration for Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd, the father of the modern English and Australian obituary. When Massingberd became obituaries editor of the London Telegraph in 1986, he created a new art form - the obit as an engrossing, entertaining and memorable read.

An obituary is the story of a life, not a death (hence the Herald's obits page, "This Life"). A good obituarist needs a sense of humour and history, an ear for a great quote and knows that the best way to illuminate the person and the times is by telling stories, the odder and funnier the better.

Important achievements or key events are the bones of the obit, but they are not its flesh. A good obit is not a dreary list of facts, like a CV or Who's Who entry. It is a crafted piece of writing, in which a well chosen anecdote reveals more than a list of all the boards she sat on, or every battle he won.

The obit of Brigadier "Speedy" Bredin, one of the London Telegraph's "moustaches", as it affectionately calls its military chaps, is a perfect example. He was no slouch as a soldier - MC won in Normandy in 1944, DSO, mentioned in dispatches - but what we remember of his character is encapsulated in a story about his shorts:

In 1954 Speedy, who "was always careful to preserve an immaculate appearance - for the sake of regimental morale," was with the 1/6th Gurkhas in Malaya. "As he was the CO, the dhobi wallah starched and creased his shorts to such perfection that when he sat in his office he would take them off and stand them up in a corner ...

"Before emerging to inspect the lines, Speedy would step into his crisp shorts, giving no sign that he'd been working at his desk in a temperature of more than 90 degrees F, with accompanying humidity."

In his obituary of Diana Mosley, Mark McGinness, one of Australia's most elegant and witty obituarists, tells a story that gives us insight into the contradictory nature of his subject, the most beautiful and enigmatic of the Mitford sisters. In one small anecdote, he draws together the dark side of her life - her support for her husband, leader of the British Union of Fascists, and her fascination with Hitler - and her legendary charm and wit. Recalling the three years during World War II that Diana spent in prison under the most spartan conditions, "One of the warders remembered, 'Oh, we've never had such laughs since Lady Mosley left.'"

No human is flawless and no interesting one was ever loved by everyone. The instinct to "be nice" or please the relatives is perhaps understandable, but hagiography should be kept for saints and mawkish sentimentality for a certain kind of greeting card; neither belongs in a good obituary.

However, love, admiration, even grief, need not preclude an assessment of a life, although few manage it as well as David Marr, whose affectionate obituary of his friend, the playwright Nick Enright, acknowledged his importance to Australian theatre, his generosity - and his passion for word games:

"He considered the Scrabble dictionary wayward and players found it easier to stick to his own, far stricter rules. He was a ferocious combatant, a sledger and took his losses seriously."

Tone, as always, is crucial. Unstuffy and light of touch, it should be sympathetic but not sycophantic, to use Massingberd's phrase. Most of the best obits also make good use of ironic understatement and sometimes a barely suppressed hilarity, as in Massingberd's own obit of Liberace:

"The first sign that Liberace had embarked upon a road along which reticence would never ride came when he placed a candelabra on his piano. At this, the dam of discretion appeared to burst: first came a white tail suit, followed by stage patter about his mother and his philosophy of life, then a gold lame jacket and a diamond-studded tailcoat."

Matthew Thompson wrote with similar amusement on Godfrey Tanner, aka "The Beast", former professor of classics at the University of Newcastle. An inspired teacher and mentor, a High Anglican and member of synod, he was nonetheless "not averse to an enthusiastic but largely platonic admiration of 'shapely bottomed youths'" and "outdrank many a robust young engineering student. In fact, the diminutive Godfrey was of such good cheer at the university bar that the University Union eventually named the bar after him."

There is one euphemism that is never used in a good obit: people don't pass on or pass away, they die (except for the medium Doris Stokes; her obituarist couldn't resist noting that she had "passed over"). Apart from that, euphemism is a game obituarists like to play: a drunk becomes "a convivial companion", a crashing bore "a tireless raconteur", and a tart is "vivacious".

Obituary writing is an art, but it's one that is as easily applied to an elderly woman who climbed over the fence to rescue her new neighbours' washing as to a former prime minister's indiscretions. At its best, it gives you something to remember. Perhaps Riverview's Father Fraser, who taught Greek and Latin to generations of Sydney boys, shooting dead two cows who had the temerity to trample his precious garden. Or Colonel Kevin Hughes, a distinguished career soldier, "as quick to take offence as to give it", who took up growing old roses in retirement. He wrote his own obituary, saying what he knew no one else would:

"Hughes felt his true metier was not the army and that he might have made a successful head or perhaps second gardener to the landed gentry. This might also have saved him a good deal of stress, made him a nicer person and given him a happier and more productive life."

Aubrey couldn't have done it better. ?

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