

The image is a screenshot of a news article header. At the top left, the word "OPINION" is written in gold. In the top center, a blue box contains the word "NEWS" in white. On the left, there is a portrait of Tony Broadbent in a hexagonal frame. Below the portrait, his name "Tony Broadbent" is written in white on a gold background. Underneath that, his title "Award-winning author, writer, speaker, brand strategist and" is written in gold. To the right of the portrait, the article title "Clive James - The Long Goodbye" is in bold blue. Below the title is a quote in blue: "His insights were truly infectious and invariably triggered further reading or viewing...His collection of biographical essays on 20th century writers, artists, and politicians in 'Cultural Amnesia', published in 2007, a prime example of that." At the bottom left of the screenshot, it says "Media & Culture" and "Tony Broadbent | Fri, 06 Dec 2019 14:42 GMT". At the bottom right, there are four social media icons: Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and a circular icon.

Clive James: The Long Goodbye

Media & Culture | Tony Broadbent | Fri, 06 Dec 2019

Clive James, the Australian author, writer, essayist, poet, lyricist, broadcaster, television critic, and television star, lauded in both hemispheres for the last 50 and more years, most especially in his adopted home, England. A man much revered for the acuity of his observations in matters both literary and louche, everything of course, larded with his driest of dry vermouth wit, has died, aged 80, after a long illness.

His wonderfully inspired insights and comments on the human condition; in its myriad absurdities as well as its multiple wonders, whether past or present, everything always presented in the most gifted of writing styles, will be sorely missed by his millions of fans. Count me as one of them.

His special gift was to blur the boundaries between highbrow and low, to illuminate without patronising, entertain without condescending. He was at one and the same time a gifted polymath and a great and good bloke...and a "fair dinkum cobber," to boot. A deliriously effective cocktail that mixed the glitter, sparkle, and flash of the wittiest of minds with his 'signature' deadpan drawl; the man and his works shining, right there, on the page, as much as he did in person or on the television.

We all of us have soundtracks to our lives, the sounds of our youth; the songs, the riffs, the lyrics, the voices all hard-wired inside that stay with us forever after. Words on the page do that, too. Authors and writers you've thrilled to, been moved by; their characters and/or observations trigger deep emotions that sear themselves into memory, into one's very being.

The same happens with certain actors of stage and screen and television; particular parts they've played lingering long in memory; the unique cadence of their voices; "stations of the breath" as Dylan Thomas once had it; all become defining figures or factors in one's own life journey.

You can count certain journalists, diarists, and essayists amongst those special figures, too. Past masters such as Alistair Cooke, Bernard Levin, and the much-missed Christopher Hitchens and, of course, the still very much alive and still very much kicking Alan Bennett. Unique voices all.

Yet of all of them, the one wry and knowing, tried and true and trusted voice that was most often beside me, on commuter train, or pub, or Sunday breakfast table, or there in front of me on 'the telly', with his sharp-eyed pieces of literary or pop culture criticism was Clive James.

In the halcyon, salad green, early colour-supplement days of yore, when he wrote for The Observer, his was the 'must-read' column, always the one to turn to first. Well, that's what happened in my house. With one added note of caution: you always had to be very careful not to have a cup of coffee in hand or too close, as a sudden piercing shard of hilarious Jamesian insight could have you literally shaking with laughter; the resultant spill over all but inevitable.

But that was the thing with Clive James: he was so very knowledgeable, so very erudite, but also so very irreverent and so very, very funny; his very presence, occasioned admiration and glee in equal measure. It was like being with a really good mate down the pub. He was the absurdly clever friend from school or college who'd read more than you'd ever thought was humanly possible and; all but inhuman this; understood most all of it, too. But you never held it against him, as he was always so generous, always so eager to share his deep-mined insights in the simple hope that you, too, might enjoy his findings and laugh or wonder along with him. His good nature, good humour, and genuine warmth, ever present.

His insights were truly infectious and invariably triggered further reading or viewing; even to re-reading or re-viewing authors, poets, books, films, television shows, or specific recordings of music you'd ignored, dismissed, or simply missed out on. His collection of biographical essays on 20th century writers, artists, and politicians in 'Cultural Amnesia', published in 2007, a prime example of that.

His five volume autobiography: 'Unreliable Memoirs' (1979); 'Falling Towards England' (1985); 'May Week Was in June' (1990); 'North Face of Soho' (2006); 'The Blaze of Obscurity' (2009); extraordinarily rich tapestries, all, of his own uncharted journey from Sydney suburb to London literary sensation and television star. All and everything beautifully intertwined with the ever-changing times: culturally, socially, and politically.

My Picador trade paperback edition of his first collection of TV criticism, 'Visions Before Midnight' (1977), that in 1981 cost me a whopping £1.75, is here on the 'working' bookshelf beside my desk; still re-read and chuckled over after all these years later; and still a favourite when I take a break to make myself a cappuccino; the cup still always positioned just out of reach, for safety's sake.

The US hardback edition of 'As Of This Writing: The Essential Essays 1968-2002' published in 2003, has all but permanent residence on the pile of 'Desert Island' books that's forever beside my bed.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but you always looked forward to spending time with Clive James. His show 'Clive James On Television', one such perpetual delight. I treasure, too, the times I heard him in full 'off-the-cuff' force, his acuity and wit well to the fore, on BBC Radio's 'Question Time' and the satirical quiz show, 'Have I Got News For You'. Also hugely memorable the broadcasts he made for BBC Radio 4's 'A Point of View'. (For the last few years, praise the Lord and the BBC, a freely available podcast.) For then, again, you could always count on him coming up with a new and different viewpoint on all manner of things; any one of which could stop you in your tracks and start you thinking afresh. A gift that kept on giving throughout all the many TV shows and documentaries he made down through the years.

As a close friend, from his time in broadcasting, said of him: "Clive James was a supreme entertainer. His gift and lasting contribution was to recognise that mass appeal does not translate into lack of substance."

"He always enjoyed himself, and made sure we did, too."

How very true. He was, as they say, a river to his people. Which he again proved, post his television years, when to keep himself firmly in the public eye, he set up clivejames.com: "The world's first personal multimedia website of its type." And so it was. It turned out to be a veritable cornucopia of all things Clive James; replete with his latest musings and wondrous poetry and prose from his seemingly bottomless archives.

Worthy of special mention, the internet show he regularly posted, 'Talking in the Library', a 'vlog' (video-log) of his conversations with such fellow literary luminaries as Jonathan Miller, Julian Barnes, and Ian McEwan.

One of the very earliest adopters of an author dot com, the media platform he developed continued to show to all and sundry that his mind was as bright and as sharp, as ever, even post the diagnosis of the chronic lymphocytic leukaemia that would eventually kill him; his intellectual luminosity shining through until the very last months and weeks of his life.

So, my eternal thanks, Clive: me old mate; me old cobbler. For that's how I always felt about you. You were there for me when I first really began to think for myself; your perspicacity opened doors to new modes of thought; not that you ever set out to teach or preach, only ever to shine a torch into places of literary merit or popular culture well worthy of another look, further study, or deeper investigation, even if only by way of your meticulous flights of allusions; sparkling, intricately coordinated patterns; that could have one do nothing but murmur one's appreciation.

I've long admired you. I've long read and re-read most all of your many works many times over. And I'll no doubt read and re-read a goodly portion them all over again, too, and laugh all over again at the cleverness and acuity of your truly inspired insights. And, yes, shed the odd tear anew at some of the poems you penned in those last years of yours. And be quietly stunned all over again by the coruscating brilliance of your continued outpourings while facing the end time.

I suspect it's going to take me a long time to again do all your works justice: all the books, all five volumes of biography, and all the poems; but I'm looking forward to reliving my time with you. And if I pace myself properly it's going to be a long time, yet, before I finally say goodbye.

Saddest of Codas: Alas, the very same week we lost Clive James, British news sources also reported the death of the preternaturally talented Jonathan Miller: Another sad loss for the Commonwealth of Brilliance.

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