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John Clugston 1942–2015

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John Clugston was a fascinating character: Gaelic speaker, eclectic amateur scholar, professional lawyer, loyal comrade and selfless volunteer. His death on 23 May 2015 has left the world a less delightful place.

John was born on 12 December 1942 at Darlinghurst, while his father was serving in the RAAF. His mother was Cornish and his father was of Ulster-Scots and English background. While studying for his Law degree he started attending St George’s Free Presbyterian Church in Sydney. Here he met his future wife, Marie McInnes, with whom he would have six children: John (deceased), Donald, Niall, Calum, Ewen and Mairi Elizabeth.

The church also brought him into contact with several Gaelic-speakers, and he started attending Gaelic classes in the city. A later legend sprang up that John had taught himself Gaelic by reading the Bible in that language, and this is almost certainly partly true. His Gaelic was characterised by an unusual accent, an archaic vocabulary and a startlingly thorough grasp of Gaelic linguistics. He was frequently called upon to present Bible readings during Gaelic services, which he did with great gusto and considerable competence.

Qualified as a legal practitioner, John spent some time in Scotland, where he indulged his passion for Gaelic, old books, and theology, amassing a fascinating collection of literature, with a particular concentration on copies of Gaelic Bibles and prayer books. These were to inspire him, later in life, to undertake a study of the marking of accusative case in pronouns in this genre; the results of this study were presented at the 2010 Australian Conference of Celtic Studies, and very well received by scholars from Australia and Scotland.

He worked for many years for the Australian Government Solicitor, during which time he became a trade union delegate and served on the state management committee of the union. He formed strong friendships with his ‘comrades’ there, and took great pleasure in using that term. This impulse towards collectivism and protection of rights found expression in his retirement when he gave legal assistance to asylum seekers.

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through the Sabian Mandaean organisation. Mandaeans are followers of John the Baptist, and suffer persecution as a religious minority under several Islamic regimes. It is characteristic of John that he found an outlet for his humanitarian instinct that also linked to his fascination with theological history.

Throughout his life, John was fascinated by new knowledge, and followed many Celtic threads. I first met him through the trade union in the early 1990s, when I was studying part-time for a Master of Arts. When John learnt that I was working on a Celtic manuscript of the Gospels his eyes lit up, and many union functions saw us in avid conversation, and sometimes argument, about ecclesiastical history and textual transmission. At one union function, we responded to a challenge by spontaneously singing the 23rd psalm in Gaelic, to the bemusement of our comrades. I lost touch with him for many years, but was privileged to have him join my Old Irish reading group within the last ten years of his life. The group explored many more twists and turns of language and culture than we would have without him.

In the manner of the thirster after knowledge, John acquired a vast collection of books. And in the absent-minded manner of many thirsters after knowledge, he often forgot that he already had a particular book, and bought another copy. There are many reasons why John will not soon be forgotten, but one is particularly delightful: Marie has very generously and thoughtfully handed on his books, and some are already being used productively by young students of Celtic. In this way, John’s legacy will endure. I think that would elicit one of his infectious self-deprecating smiles.