Two Stylists

David McCooey

Ken Bolton (ed.)
*Homage to John Forbes*
Brandl & Schlesinger
$28.95pb, 227pp, 1 876040 38 6

Ivor Indyk (ed.)
*David Malouf: A Celebration*
NLA, $14.95pb, 42pp, 0 642 10745 9

Jean Cocteau once wrote: ‘Poetry is a religion with no hope.’ This is apt when considering John Forbes, who died in 1998 at the age of forty-seven. Forbes knew lots about the hopeless religion of poetry, and was obsessed with the idea of being a poet. Many of his poems concern vocation, poetic election and influence, and it’s no accident that he wrote so many odes, elegies and homages, all of which are shot through with his characteristic irony. ‘Your vocation calls / & you answer it’, begins ‘On the Beach’. But that vocation looks more like ‘something you did for a bet / & now regret, like a man / walking the length of the bar on his hands / balancing a drink on shoe’.

Reputation, in such a religion, takes hope’s place. But literary reputation, especially the posthumous kind, is a deliquescent thing. If it’s not going to melt away, then work is needed from friends and publishers, even critics. Forbes, while not exactly ignored in his lifetime, didn’t get his due. *Homage to John Forbes*, published as a companion volume to last year’s *Collected Poems* (reviewed in *ABR*, September 2001), shows friends, publishers and critics making up for this neglect. Forbes knew about reputation. In a review of Michael Dransfield’s posthumous *Collected Poems*, he wrote that Dransfield’s death allowed him to be packaged ‘as the Keats of smack and hippydom’. The danger with Forbes is that he becomes the Coleridge of cough mixture and furniture removal. Certainly, those aspects of his life figure in *Homage to John Forbes*, but the overwhelming picture, it must be said, *is* of a Coleridgean figure: a brilliant mind; a brilliant talker; early hopes of youth dashed; a discombobulated life; ill health; disappointment.

But it’s not disappointment here. *Homage to John Forbes* is pleasantly mixed: a book-launch speech by Carl Harrison-Ford; poems by John Tranter, Tracy Ryan and others; Ivor Indyk’s essay (still the most significant criticism of Forbes); reminiscences by friends; a ‘sort of free-association’ by Ken Bolton, the book’s editor; an interview with Forbes; Forbes’s
essay on ‘The Working Life’; some marvellous photographs; and Ken Searle’s painting John Forbes as Zeus. The copy-editing is pretty shonky at times, and most of the pieces have appeared elsewhere, but this book is utterly enjoyable and utterly necessary.

The best piece is by Forbes’s peer Laurie Duggan; it is simultaneously sensible, insightful and funny. Duggan takes his Overland obituary as a starting point and adds letters to and from Forbes, giving an interesting perspective on what others say about Forbes’s attitudes. It also contains priceless Forbesian comedy. For example: ‘I hear a reference to the Internet on TV — recently I looked up the “John Forbes” sites — there’s 40-odd thousand of them! many not referring to moi!’ The jokes become more pathetic as the book proceeds, such as Forbes’s description of himself going to a student ‘techno rock dance’: ‘I, tanked to the eyeballs, outdanced the little fuckers — in speed & technique — for about 4 hours!’

It is perhaps not surprising that two of the more critical pieces are by women. While written with great warmth, both Rosemary Hunter and Pam Brown find Forbes’s masculinity problematic. Brown writes that Forbes’s interest in weaponry has a ‘boy’s-own tone’ she finds ‘puerile’. Hunter deals with another leitmotif: Forbes’s desire for unattainable women.

Others make clear he could be extremely difficult. Peter Porter narrates without bitterness how Forbes condescended to him, asked to be put up at Porter’s London flat, and rummaged through Porter’s papers during the night. There are many sides, then, to this homage. Alan Wearne writes about Forbes’s love of poetry, and Cassie Lewis writes of Forbes as a private poetry tutor, Lewis having seen a ‘handwritten note tacked to the window of a Rathdowne Street bookshop. It offered poetry lessons at an hourly rate by “John Forbes, Australian poet”’.

Rereading Homage to John Forbes, I realise I have stolen the idea of Forbes-as-Coleridgean from John Tranter (whose marvellous poem ‘God on a Bicycle’ is equally Forbesian and Tranteresque). A piece of Coleridge’s table talk clinches the matter: ‘Bygone images and scenes of early life have stolen into my mind, like breezes blown from the spice-islands of Youth and Hope — those twin realities of this phantom world!’ The tropical beach, the nostalgia, the philosophical predilections: how Forbesian Coleridge was. Of course, Youth and Hope gave up on Forbes before he gave up on them. Homage to John Forbes shows the tragedy and the comedy of that. It also strongly makes the case for the need for a biography of Forbes.

David Malouf, Florence, 1979

The five poems by Malouf are a welcome touch and remind us that Malouf began his career as a poet. Vivian Smith covers Malouf-as-poet, writing that in the 1970s he ‘seemed independent of the easy groupings, the catcheries and the labels of the time’. This is true, and the paradoxical sense of Malouf as a gregarious loner comes through elsewhere in the book. This is also related to Ivor Indyk’s observation that Malouf’s ‘public reputation rests on the most private grounds of all, the achievement of intimacy’, an intimacy Indyk describes as ‘lyrical, sensual and immediate’.

Indyk writes that, paradoxically, this intimacy comes from a sense of distance. This is seen in 12 Edmondstone Street, a minor masterpiece of autobiography overshadowed by Malouf’s major novels. The intimacy in that book comes from its concern with the author’s childhood, which is also the source of distance (how can we remember being a child?). For all its lyricism, sensuality and immediacy, 12 Edmondstone Street isn’t a kind of mindless hedonism. Indeed, those qualities are treated with a cerebral intensity. As this welcome celebration shows, Malouf is a writer who attracts paradoxes.

Malouf and Forbes seem to be opposite kinds of writers. Malouf has gained mainstream respectability in the official culture of universities, arts administration and the performing arts, while Forbes had a precarious hold on tutoring jobs, writer-in-residencies and grants. They are both, however, stylists obsessed with the mind and its strange embodiment. Is it the fault of their hopeless ‘religion’ that their lives turned out so differently? Impossible to say, but one can’t help but note the pathos of a comment by Forbes in a letter to Laurie Duggan: ‘Why didn’t life turn out the way it looked in Cronulla in 1967?’ Here, in retrospect, irony seems to have abandoned him to the bitter poetry of hopelessness.