

Two to Three Taswegians

Michael X. Savvas

Abstract

My good friend and former English literature tutor, Syd Harrex, will be rightfully honoured as a brilliant poet and scholar. I hope in the attached collection of Syd's poems and my prose pieces to further honour Syd as a poet, but also to honour him as a human and *bon vivant*, with a great sense of humour, an appreciation of wine and the bawdy and a healthy lack of prudishness. I hope that the honest qualities in my writing pay tribute to Syd's comparable sensibilities. I begin by writing about Syd's love for Kangaroo Island and a poem he wrote there in 2005 about Errol Flynn. Then I discuss a book Syd and I started to collaborate on, *Sad, Happy Places*, and present 'Striding in from the Sea' and 'Catalyst,' poems Syd wrote for our proposed book. I also present two prose pieces that I wrote for our book and read to Syd, 'Marketing Bullshit' and 'The Blue Flame of Magic.' The latter piece is appropriate as a tribute to Syd, dealing with two of his great loves: cricket and the subcontinent.

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It was the last English literature conference I attended with Syd on Kangaroo Island, the adopted home he cherished so much. I felt a mixture of isolation and freedom on this wonderful island, and perhaps a feeling Syd had on KI reminded him of Tasmania, the island he was from originally. I decided to present a paper on the writings of another fascinating Taswegian wordsmith, Errol Flynn. Syd and I had discussed Flynn on several occasions, and Syd told me that a desk at the University of Tasmania had Errol's name carved into it. (It may have been inscribed by a fan of Errol's, or even a fan of his father's, as the latter was an eminent academic at the university, whereas Errol's quest for learning was neither fanned nor extinguished in a university.)

At a morning muffin and coffee break in the conference, I wandered back to the dorm I was staying in, not far from the Penneshaw conference venue that overlooked the sparkling ocean. I shaved off almost all of my stubble, apart from a pencil-thin moustache. Using product, I made my hair look sleek as an otter and wore tan slacks and a long-sleeved shirt. I'd tucked inside the shirt a silk cravat with an elegant blue and red paisley design. I had become Errol Flynn. I received the amused responses I wanted when I sauntered inside the conference room and gave my presentation. My theatrical gesture became an even more surreal experience when, at the end of the presentation, my mate Paul Sutton asked me his question (about penguins) through a megaphone. It seemed like the right thing to do. Afterwards, respected theorist Helen Tiffin approached me with a warm smile and said how she enjoyed my paper. I asked her whether I should have mentioned why I was dressed up, and she said that I definitely did the right thing not to mention it at all. Afterwards, a few of us went to the front bar of the pub down the street,

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the Penneshaw Hotel. Paul carried his megaphone and I was still dressed as Errol. Amid the wary looks of local farmers, the delegates and the delicates shared a couple of beers. Syd suddenly felt inspired to write a poem about Errol Flynn. He asked me to transcribe what had come into his head, and I certainly did not want to miss a testimonial from Syd about Errol's literary prowess. I found a blue biro and a nearby serviette and scribbled the following that Syd, possessed by his muse, dictated to me:

Syd Harrex, Penneshaw Hotel Wed 14/12/05

When Errol Flynn died,
He was 10,000 fucks away
From his real potential:
Death at age 70.

I still treasure the tattered serviette with Syd's anti-testimonial.

During one of our many pleasant conversations at Table One in the Red Vines restaurant at Flinders University, Syd and I decided to collaborate on a book. He would write the poems, naturally, and I would write prose pieces. The unifying theme of the collection would be places that were simultaneously happy and sad. Syd's original title was *Happy, Sad Places*, but after reflection, I offered that *Sad, Happy Places* rolled off the tongue better and Syd, often humble, agreed. Sometimes at Table One, Syd would ask me to read poems he'd written. On other occasions, I would collect him from outside his rural home and drive to Coromandel Valley's ambient and very colonial-looking Duck Inn, where we would exchange our poems and prose over a couple of bottles of white wine. One time, I took my Persian girlfriend, Setare (meaning 'star') with us to the Duck Inn. She spoke and understood little English, but versed in the great poetry of Rumi and Hafez, Setare had a genuine admiration for poetry and poets, so she felt honoured to be in the company of the real deal, a man who was by disposition and habit an authentic poet. Setare was tall, dark (in every way), stately and impossibly beautiful: a princess transported straight from the magical pages of *1001 Arabian Nights*. When people met her, they often asked her in all sincerity whether she was an actual princess. I first introduced Syd to Setare by saying, 'This is the lady I've spoken so much about,' and he said, 'I can see why!' Setare asked me to dance with her at the Duck Inn (with evocative Persian hand and hip movements to Western pop and rock), and while we danced and loved, Syd wrote the following poem for *Sad, Happy Places* and dedicated it to Setare:

‘Striding in from the Sea’
Dedicated to Setare (5th May, 2013)

As you unreluctantly leave
the table to dance, and perhaps
jig as the Celtic influence asserts itself,
I study my static feet but count
the verse syllables nevertheless.

As I write yet another love is on,
the loving again leaving me dangling
my legs on sea wall where dramas
of escape and incarceration taunt
my beautiful/ugly colonial heritage
where I first learned how to fish
but entangle the life-lines
of my colonial past, now pre-pearl
morning, but I must leave post-haste.

Syd would always ask about what I was writing. This was the first contribution I’d written for *Sad, Happy Places* and read to Syd at the Duck Inn:

Marketing Bullshit

New York *does* sleep. That was one of my strongest impressions when searching for a restaurant at 11.30 pm on my first night there — a Friday. In streets close to Central Park, several empty restaurants with upturned chairs inside suggested a heavy, slow-wave, stage 3 slumber.

‘New York *sleeps*. That’s just marketing bullshit: New York never sleeps.’ So spoke the taxi driver who was aggressive and friendly at the same time in an accent that was Bronx (I guess) and ethnic at the same time.

I sat in the back, fatigued and hungry. A Jon Cleary novel had informed me that Australians showed their democratic generosity and magnanimity by sitting in the front seat of taxis. But that’s just marketing bullshit: it was actually to keep an eye on the fare meter.

Clearly, many equated happiness with Times Square’s tsunami of people and collide-erscope of colours and images. But for me, New York was New Year’s Eve: it fell short of the hype and excited reports that had preceded our meeting. My second major impression was that I felt very vulnerable in the neon heart of this city, where crazies talked or shouted to themselves and loitering gangs assessed you with mercenary eyes.

And I’d booked my hotel room from Adelaide, paid good guilt-edged money to stay at the iconic Essex House and have a view of Central Park with a Manhattan skyline: the hotel George

Harrison, Paul Simon and other guests on *Saturday Night Live* stayed at in the 70s. Not to be placed on the third floor of the hotel, with a view of the foliage of three trees and a super-sized American flag that colonised two thirds of the view from my window frame. So I complained on the second day to the sympathetic Filipino bellhop and agreed to pay \$20 to get a room upgraded to the *actual* one I'd imagined into existence. This new room brought me the happiness of a conflict victory, a view that inspired me to at least want to write (if not do), albeit with a touch of vertigo.

And Central Park was a nice place to while away time on a sunny day. But it was essentially ... a park. Yet people flocked to this vast expanse of simulated nature that was akin to Kim Kardashian/Dim Darkcashingin: pleasant to look at but merely famous for being famous. Park visitors walked and skated and ran, and it really struck me that with the right marketing bullshit, even grass, rocks and water can be an exciting tourist destination.

It also struck me either then or just now that New York was a place of the imagination, where the more you knew about the things that had been done there and the people who had done them, the more New York became imaginivacious. Being aware of the *New York Times* as one of the world's most credible newspapers gave the city the same trench-coated gravitas. Knowing that J. D. Salinger only wanted to be published in *The New Yorker* gave its namesake city a comparable prestige. There could be ten thousand and seven different reasons why people would personalise a quest to visit NY, all of them based on some resonant tale that had planted the roots of imagination in them. But was it one of those places that only awoke — and never slept — when informed visitors activated it, or was it somewhere that had an innate excitement that would shake the soul when one first saw it regardless of whether you knew anything about it? Perhaps all destinations fall into one of those two categories.

Syd wrote and shared with me the following poem that may have ended up in *Sad, Happy Places*:

'Catalyst' (October 20, 2013)

Who says there is no sense in nonsense?
That bugger who can't work things out.
What's happened to good old creative fashion
For ignorance dressed as a mannequin,
And mannequin, undressed like Greek goddesses.
There he goes again, licking the fur
Of his fantasies, that imperial tortoise-
Shell feline who taught me all I know
Of sleeping, marking it in the dark darkness
And the millions of unimaginable realities.

This was another prose piece I shared with Syd at Duck Inn, intended for our book, *Sad, Happy Places*. Syd particularly liked the phrase 'the blue flame of magic.'

The Blue Flame of Magic

Officially, Lahore was known as the Garden City. But when I lived rough there and attended a Pakistani professor's talk on the spiritual music qawwali and how it could connect you to God, the professor lamented that his city had become the Garbage City. For me, Lahore was hot and dusty. Yet Pakistan was the country where ideas were neurogenerated and then appeared in the world. Pakistan itself had been formed this way just fifty years earlier. Muhammed Ali Jinnah's idea was to create a Muslim state separate from India. And I felt blown away by the notion that the country I was living in — without downplaying the bloody violence of its history — was essentially the result of this idea.

And there were other ideas. Although we'd broken up (whatever that means), before we went our disrespectful respective separate ways to Hawaii and Pakistan, my daughter Olivia's mother had expressed her fears that I would meet an expatriate Greta Scacchi lookalike. That seemed like one of the most ludicrous scenarios she had presented me with. I was going to a country where the English rose look wasn't exactly the norm, and I preferred the dark and sultry look anyway.

And I had my own idea. If I was going to be in self-imposed exile for a year to work, on a meagre wage, for a blindness agency, I needed a diversion. I would try to meet cricketing royalty Imran Khan, write a book about him and donate any profits to his hospital in Lahore, the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre. It was a great idea — what the Greeks would call a *megali idea*. Of course, upon arriving in Lahore, I had no idea — or what the Australians would call No Fucking Idea — how I would meet the most famous Pakistani in the world. I started by discovering a second-hand book shop in Lahore and being lucky enough to pick up a paperback copy of Imran's autobiography. Dullest book ever. A swarthy, seething, charismatic Pathan aristocrat renowned as an international playboy and close friend of Lady Di, Imran recounted a series of tedious cricketing minutiae. Although no mention was made of his glamorous and amorous adventures, Imran's pages upon pages of cricket scores did shed light on his success with the ladies: he clearly *bored* the pants off of them.

Mr Mahmood(y), my suave underling at Aziz Jehan Begum Trust for the Blind, gave me the insider's perspective on Imran as further background information for hunting my conceptual prey. Mr Mahmood — who insisted on calling me Mr Michael — sported a moustache, like the vast majority of his male compatriots. He wore a smart white shalwar kameez and his hair was always combed and parted perfectly, never moving out of place. He was a gentleman and had an impassive look on his face most the time. A lot of my 'job' involved sitting at my desk, with Mr Mahmood pulling up a chair adjacent to me and expecting to converse for half the day. This routine was interrupted only by the mandatory sweet and milky tea breaks for all of the office workers and the odd phone call to the telephone operators who would routinely hang up on me when I requested a phone number they were unable or uninterested to supply. So there were plenty of opportunities to talk about Imran. Mr Mahmood said that Imran was a great cricketer but not necessarily popular as a politician. When, at a public event, a woman bared her cleavage to Imran and asked him to sign one of her mammaries, he called her disgusting. What kind of playboy testily knocks back a bap? Imran's mixed values led to some people perceiving him as a

hypocrite ... which some people would consider the mark of a successful politician. And yet, Imran himself was also a further expression of Pakistan, where ideas flourish like orange kair flowers in a Punjabi desert. Imran had imagined becoming a world-class cricketer and became one and then re-imagined himself as a powerful politician in his country, and also made that idea become a reality. For me, he was an alchemist of ideas and someone to admire.

These were the steps I'd taken to research Imran. I'd been in Lahore for perhaps a couple of months. My young local friends would ask me in a quaint archaic English, 'What is your conveyance?' My conveyance soon became a no-frills bicycle I'd purchased, which I rode through the hot, dusty and noxious-smelling streets of Lahore. Mangy chickens often ran around the streets between serious-looking men in brown and grey costumes — perhaps one of the few occasions in which my theory (that inserting chickens into a situation instantly made it comical) did not hold. Whenever I ventured onto the anarchic roads that had no lanes yet could accommodate seemingly endless rows of assorted beeping and belching conveyances and life forms, I called this the Game of Death. (This term was no doubt influenced by Rudyard Kipling's detail-laden portrayal of the chaos of Lahore, his novel *Kim*.) Motorbikes were a popular 'conveyance,' and people's wilfulness in imagining them as cars rather than bikes prevailed. Families often travelled on motorbikes and played the Game of Death. The best example I saw of this was a bike with the man riding at the front, his wife seated in the traditional side-saddle behind him with two children behind her and a goat at the very back. The full catastrophe.

One day I rode my push (and shove) bike to the unexpectedly Antipodean ANZ Grindlay's bank, where I would draw on my ever-dwindling and pitiful funds. I'd been coming here for the same purpose perhaps once a week for several weeks. I would make small talk with one of the bank tellers there, but on this occasion when I noticed him watching the cricket on the bank television above his head, I also noticed the family name on his name badge: Khan. I jokingly asked if he was related to Imran Khan.

He looked me in the eye, and with no hesitation, replied, 'Yes, he's my first cousin.'

Absolutely astonished, I said that I was trying to meet and interview Imran. 'Do you know how I can contact him?'

'Yes, I'll give you his home phone number.' And sure enough, he wrote down a number for me.

My head spun with the unlikelihood of what had just happened. I played the Game of Death with more hutzpah as I rode back to my accommodation. The same dusty room, kitchen and bathroom where I would 'shower' and wash my shirts with a cold bucket of water. The same abode I would, with almost zero knowledge of cooking, 'cook' two-minute noodles on my stove plate — and eat rusk in when I became gravely ill. The informal zoo that provided speedy chipcullis (geckoes) on the walls and small brown frogs that I had to brush out of my bed before not sleeping.

I couldn't believe that in my life of squalor and penury, I had touched the blue flame of magic. And yet when I rang the phone number on a public phone, a deep and relaxed Oxonian voice spoke back at me: the world-famous Imran Khan! I told him about my idea of interviewing him and incorporating those interviews into a book, and that sales from same would all go to his hospital.

Although Imran spoke with an impressive and educated voice, he surprised me by sounding relaxed about my having his home phone number and was less formal and clipped than I'd expected. I asked if I could meet him to talk more. He said that he didn't have his diary with him but I could call him at his office to work out a time. My new buddy Imran gave me his office phone number.

When I rang the Imster at his office, he politely told me to ring back another day. I'd learnt that it was not part of Pakistani culture to say no directly, and I wondered whether this was all an elaborate way of saying no to my request. But I'll never know. Sickness of the body and soul took me away from the idea state. But a lot of Pakistan was about not knowing. Being aware that my body was wasting away from a mysterious disease and not knowing its source (while treating it with local tablets that contained opium and made me light-headed); becoming aware that an idea was the most subtle and powerful force of all (and before my insight much later that one of the hardest things to change is a stupid idea in a closed mind), without being any closer to knowing the *why* of any of this. My quest for the malt drink Milo exemplifies this uncertainty. Often, I would ride my bike past a billboard for Milo and this evocative advertisement made the thought of attaining such beverage utterly irresistible. A lot of my time in Lahore was punctuated by quests for sugary drinks of one sort or another. Nothing tasted better than a small bottle of Coke I would sometimes treat myself to on a particularly hot day. If I was really inclined to treat myself, I would take a rickshaw (another bike willing itself to be a car) to an international hotel and savour every drop of the one cold mango lassi I could afford. My junkie-like search for a hit of Milo led me to a corner store in a back street near my room. When I requested a Milo from the shopkeeper, he asked me to wait and brought from the back of the room an elder statesman in a pristine white shalwar kameez. I thought the distinguished gentleman would tell me a great truth (maybe he did), but all he said in a measured tone, unimpeachable dignity and a raised index finger was that 'Milo is not in season.'

My loneliness in Lahore was almost unbearable. I was grieving and pining for my ex-partner and missing terribly my young daughter, Olivia. Whenever I heard a child cry, I would feel like crying from the referred pain of imagining Olivia. In my new home, I'd made an eclectic group of friends: young Pakistani Muslims and Christians; a local Communist (son of a Communist tortured by the Government for his different ideas) who made his own illegal wine from apples, plums and other fruit in stills inside his house; a fellow Australian worker; a wife of a General; a Frenchman; and American ex-pat volunteers. But you know, as Tom Waits sang, 'Well, the night does funny things inside a man; these old tom-cat feelings you don't understand.'

For some reason, minor celebrities in the West sometimes took on a larger life in Pakistan. Adorning the front of a barber's in Lahore was a large poster of the Australian journalist, Stan Grant. Randomly, the B-grade American actress Phoebe Coates, who had appeared in maybe two or three one-hit wonders in the 80s, was popular in Pakistan (with the locals pronouncing her name as Fobby Cats). I even bought a large poster of Fobby Cats, someone I'd probably never thought about in my life, and stuck it on my wall above my bed. Fobby Cats inspired tom-cat feelings I do understand, and I would desire her as though she were the Venus de Milo (or just Milo) while I lay in bed with my brown frogs and listened to the locally pirated cassettes of the Bee Gees, Bruce Springsteen, the ethereal Crowded House, Tom Waits and qawwali. I'd picked up several of these cassettes from a shop called Off Beat, a very well-organised shop Mr

Mahmood took me to, where they sold the pirated cassettes for around two dollars each. In the early stages of my illness, I was determined to define myself by more than my ailing body and invited an English ex-pat to my room for dinner. She agreed to eat the arguably repulsive meal of substitute mince I'd made, which we both ate sitting on the floor. The vivacious, charming Cambridge graduate graciously ate my slop. The strange thing was, the blonde, blue-eyed sophisticate bore a strong resemblance in appearance and manner to ... Greta Scacchi.

Dr Michael X. Savvas is a senior lecturer in the Transition Office at Flinders University. He had the great honour of being taught as an English undergraduate by Syd Harrex. Michael and Syd later became colleagues and developed a strong friendship. Syd always encouraged Michael's writing and asked about what he was working on. Michael's standard reply that he spent his time writing bureaucratic reports and emails (that said so much while saying so little) amused Syd mildly at first, but he astutely observed that Michael needed to come up with a new answer.