

ENCOUNTERS

...and collisions

GORDON McLAUCHLAN



Introduction

A long time ago, I came to understand that, if I listened carefully to someone talking about someone else, I would likely learn more about the someone than the someone else; so anyone who reads these encounters of mine will probably learn as much about me as the subjects under discussion.

Personal essays are a major literary genre in the United States where just about any journalist or writer who is anybody has put a collection together; but only lately, and mainly among the young tending to bare their souls, timidly, have they emerged here. Perhaps earlier generations were too passionless, as I once suggested, too buttoned up, to reveal much of themselves.

I was always on the move as a boy, following my peripatetic journalist father from town to town and school to school – eight primary schools from the age of eight to twelve. This left me detached, an outsider, trying to wait out – and maybe have to fight – yet another set of enemies in the hope they would become, at least tentatively, friends.

Detachment is not a bad attitude for a journalist/writer/broadcaster. I don't think it's unwise in the context of today to say this, but I've long believed the reason so many gay people are perceptive as writers and artists is they grow up with edgy sensitivity, wary and fearful at the sense of being outsiders. At one time, dangerous outsiders. Happily not so much any more.

This lonely childhood meant I've been writing to myself and talking to myself for a long time, sorting life out as best I could in words. Hundreds of thousands of them have found their way into my notebooks and commonplace book, mostly personal and of no value to anyone else.

But along the way – as a journalist and also for a couple of decades an on-the-move international traveller – I met hundreds of people whose lives touched mine. As I went I wrote stories about these encounters – in some cases collisions – that I have resurrected from my note-

books and computer files. Two of these stories have appeared before although not quite in this form, one in a newspaper and the other in a magazine.

In a few cases, perhaps because my encounters were intensely personal, I have not used names but where people have engaged in public discourse, as I have, then their names are public property.

These stories are all true, insofar as it's possible to restrain my imagination.

One more thing. I'm a believer in what I call slow intelligence. High IQ delivers slick and easy answers with admirable precision and on time, accurate right now, clear and there for all to see and admire, but they come from what Aldous Huxley once described as the 'merely clever'. Underneath this brilliance are those who take longer to harvest the answers, then turn them over to see the full dimension, measure likely consequences, estimate longevity, try imaginatively to see where they fit – and discard the cheap and meretricious. Or does that all take too long now?

Gordon McLauchlan
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