

# **Errr...**

**A Brief Life and Critical Bibliography  
of the Late ABEL ABBOTT**

## **The Works of Abel Abbot**

Given Abel Abbott's peripatetic life and extremely casual attitude to everything ( excepting the faults of others! ) this list is certainly incomplete. Any additional information that readers can supply would be greatly appreciated. As very few (3, as far as we know) of his works were ever published, and he was known to revise his work over many years, assigning dates to them is problematic.

### **AT DAYTRAP**

A 'novel' in the form of a collection of stories. The Pig, Roy and theHag, Cut and Come Again, The Asian Bride, The Sixty-Niner, Dr Who and the Darlings, The Interstellar Sexdrive, The Prickly Pear, The Spirited Flesh, Fear of Flying, Reginal: A Memoir, Introduction by Sir Pelham Corrie, The Jacaranda Tree, Dog, The Space Cadet, Chief Talking Bull and The Basgetti Drive.

This, the nearest to a completed work of all the manuscripts, exists in many variants. In a series of sixteen or seventeen independent but related stories the narrator, Reg, a youth, recounts his Uncle Vern's (misguided and misanthropic) attempts to instill in him, Reg, a sense of what it is to be a man. This is a comic work, at times arch, at times lugubrious, often lewd and predominately farcical.

Anecdotal evidence\* 1 suggests that the first twelve of the stories was written in the late winter of 1993, and the bulk of the rest over the next three months. The last three or four seem to have been written at least eight years later, as they do not appear in any of the earlier samizdat editions.

### **QUID RIDES?**

Several attempted essays bore this title. Throughout his adult life Abbott was preoccupied, obsessed, at times, with laughter. In conversation he often claimed to know more about laughter than anyone who' had ever lived. There are many examples of his attempts to record his theoretical ideas, mostly in essay form. These accounts varied considerably over a thirty year period. In the earliest examples he appeared to think that laughter might be a complex non-verbal form of communication. The later attempts were slightly more sober, although he still claimed that laughter was " the everyday lynchpin by which humans maintain and propagate the grand agreement."

### **MISS K'S BOOK OF ONE PAGE ONEDERS**

Only one copy of this work was produced and it has disappeared. The only complete copy was dedicated and sent to a young girl with whom Abbott apparently corresponded for a period of three years, from 2001 until 2006. Apparently his young correspondent was recovering from an attack of scarlet fever and stricken also with boredom. He compiled a hundred or so items, each of which could be fitted onto one page. His original intention was to illustrate each page with graphics but this intention, like so many others, was never fulfilled. All that remains currently are a score or so pages and a tantalizing list of contents. This also appears to have been his most ambitious attempt to wed the olfactory to the literary. Abbott refers to this work in correspondance with the artist Phillip Edwards\*2.

### **THE NOTES**

There are numerous typescripts and computer discs and hard drives that contain thousands of brief notes. Many others are to be found written in the back of books he possessed. Ranging in size from a single word to a couple of paragraphs, they appear to have been compiled as a resource. They were never further utilized, nor compiled but are included here as they form a cohesive if not coherent whole. Most could be characterized as inconsequential non-sequiturs.

## VERSE

Early in his writing career, Abbott was an habitud of poetry readings. Even though he always thought of himself as predominately a prose writer he attended these events in search of a captive and uncritical audience for his shorter prose works. Privately, and not so privately, he averred that most of those who attended poetry readings were worse than devoid of talent. As he grew older he turned his back on poetry completely.\*3 Nevertheless he did write quite a lot of material in verse form which he referred to as doggerel.

## ABO and WORLD OF ART

Abo was the closest Abbott came to publishing success. As was the case with the Notes, and Quid Rides?, Abbott worked for over fifteen years on Abo, yet it remained formless, rambling and incomplete: some in first person, some in third, employing disparate styles. There is, among his papers, a request from Penguin Books for a further draft\*4. This is referred to in Abbott's personal correspondence with the painter, Edwards.

" I asked for an editor and some dough, and they send me this. I am not going to spend another year doing this only to have them ask me to change it again at the end. I might as well write what they want in the first place. Fuck 'em. I don't like their attitude. Lazy, exploitive, ignorant bastards."

The manuscripts relating to Aborigines combined amount to over a million words. One discrete section he called World of Art. Little of it reflects well on either him or the Aborigines\*5.

## THE MORE I SEE OF PEOPLE

Abbott prefaced this work with Rimbaud's declaration that a writer would murder his mother for the sake of a story. He has drawn - etched is perhaps a better term - a scathing series of portraits of people he claims to have known. Some of the victims of these portraits - I say 'victims' because few of them are complimentary - were well known, most were obscure. The main motivation seems to have been a felt need for revenge. Splenetic and bilious, not at all uplifting, unpublishable until the subjects have died, nevertheless it is arguable that herein lies some of his best work, seething, turbulent, hissing and almost Dickensian in its uncontrollable abuse of the language in a mad lunge at an orgasm of hatred - literary outsider art.

## SUNDRY STORIES

The bulk of Abbott's earliest work consist of short stories. Halting, pretentious, selfregarding and awkward, they clearly adumbrate his later work. He appears to have placed no value on them as this form was not employed beyond his 27th year and they are never referred to in his correspondence or other works.

### \*1 H. Firkin, personal correspondence.

" In September 1993 I received, in my capacity as editor of the literary magazine 'Verso', a letter purporting to be from 'Dawn McCorkle' containing a story entitled The Pig in which several men in the bush, decide that having sex with their pet pig is not quite right. They find a woman for the purpose, but eventually return to their relationship with the pig and send the woman away. I knew at once that this was not the work of a woman, and, furthermore, that it was almost certainly the work of Abbott with whom I had had a slight but sufficient acquaintance.

"At the time he was living somewhere in the country. The post code on the envelope was somewhere in Gippsland, but the return address was to the care of one 'P.Batty' ( a probably fictional person ) in Melbourne.

The typescript was blotchy and several keys on the typewriter did not work at all - for instance 'u's were substituted for 'i' and spaces were left for 'o's which were inserted manually. The accompanying letter - in a woman's hand - was coy and disingenuous, and a half-smart attempt to circumvent my determination - which I once made perfectly clear to him personally - not to publish any of his misanthropic work.

" I wrote back as if to this 'Dawn' and advised her that this was not the sort of thing we were after and that I couldn't

suggest any other possible publisher. Over the next three months I received a story each week until there were a total of twelve, plus an introduction and a memoir. I was steadfast in declining to reply. Abbott needed no encouragement.

" The final item in this series was received in early December 1993, so I would surmise that it was written over those three months."

**\*2 A. Abbott, letter to P. Edwards.**

"Miss K has not been well and is down in the dumps so I have sent her a book of 'one page wonders' (sic) ... the original idea I got when I bought a blank book of handmade paper, but I don't want to write directly into it because my handwriting is illegible; and sticking printed pages in would have burst the binding... eventually I found a particular sort of photo album bound in reinforced brown cardboard which was perfect .... I tried to make it smell like the best of North Queensland. I picked a dozen mangoes and milked the 'turpentine' from the stems onto the covers. They stained magnificently and then I added a good deal of lime zest both between the pages and ground into the covers, and a little durian for that suggestion of putrefaction. Unfortunately the magnificent aromas completely dissipated over the next two days, so I traced around the stains, coloured it in like a child, and called it 'a map of the unknown world'."

**\*3 M. Brennan Good Riddance: A Memoir of Abel Abbott p 4**

" One afternoon we took a train to the city. He always carried a book around and on this occasion he brought an anthology of English poetry. The train took fifteen minutes to get to Flinders St and in that time he flicked through the whole book, which encompassed some five hundred years of English poetry, and concluded that there was nothing in it worth reading. He threw it into a rubbish bin with some force.

" This negativity got worse as he grew older. He made a virtue of it. Curmudgeon became a term of high praise, which he regularly bestowed upon himself. To most of us, though, it was tedious in the extreme.

" For Abbott, 'the test of time' involved a period of no more than ten minutes. He boasted that he never read more than the first sentence or two of most books, claiming that in that time you could tell if the work was any good. " Life is too short," he would say. "Going into a library is intensely depressing," he claimed, because there were too many books."

**\*4 Correspondence from Penguin Books, March 1989.**

**\*5 Beverley Knight Afterthoughts p 683**

Abbott we met when he tried to peddle Aboriginal paintings around our end of Collins st. While his essential vulgarity was ill-disguised by a veneer of psychopathic cunning, it had to be admitted that he did know all the original Papunya painters well. After Clifford Possum died he came to me with a proposition. He had written a memoir of Clifford when he heard of his passing and thought that he could write similar memoirs of all the artists and the resultant text of fifty thousand words or so would, with illustrations, amount to an interesting and saleable text. Indeed it might have. I agreed to consider it and if we went ahead I would find the illustrations and a publisher. The manuscript he wrote after work and on weekends over a six week period. For some weeks after I read it I had to avoid talking to him, even over the phone. " World of Art " he called it. There was very little of art in it. There was defecation, stabbing, sexual perversion, venality, fraud and so forth. Noone emerged well, not the artists, no one, especially not Abbott. I quickly dropped the whole idea. Unfortunately just because I wouldn't take his phone calls he thought I was avoiding him. Our moving house at around this time - I suppose he delivered the manuscript late in 2002 resulted in his not collecting the envelope until nearly two years later. It was then that he showed his true colours and as you might imagine I was not unhappy to see the end of him.