
THE AUSTRALIAN

A fatherless boy in Kogarah, gadfly of global culture and immortal son of our language

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Vivian “Clive” James. Stuart Jeffries, *The Guardian*, Thursday:

(His mother) named her only child Vivian, after the male star of the 1938 Australian Davis Cup team. It could have been worse. There was, James noted in *Unreliable Memoirs* (1979), a famous Australian boy whose father named him after his campaigns across the Western Desert: he was called William Bardia Escarpment Qattara Depression Mersa Matruh El Alamein Benghazi Tripoli Harris.

Grown-up. More Grauniad:

(He was) at once a high-minded litterateur who taught himself Russian because he “could no longer bear not to know something about how Pushkin sounded” and an avuncular TV bloke known for showing us clips of sadistic Japanese game shows.

Tough-minded. James, *The New York Times*, November 20, 2014:

If you believe that Philip Larkin (1922-85) wrote some of the best English-language poems of modern times, then it has been a trial to see his questionable track record as an everyday human being get in the way of his reputation as an artist ... Unfortunately for Larkin’s image ... it became evident that he had indulged himself in racist and sexist language. It had not occurred to the executors that they might have prefaced their respective volumes (of selected letters and biography) with a health warning in capital letters pointing out what should have been obvious: that Larkin talked that way only in his private life; that he believed his letters to be part of his private life, too; and that in his public life he was courteous and charming to anyone he met, of whatever gender or racial background

Trent Dalton, *The Australian*, March 26, 2015:

Clive loves language and linguistics and kookaburras and Katharine Hepburn in full cinematic flight and Napoleonic history and the jokes of Peter Cook and Game of Thrones and Melbourne trams and Cathy Freeman and the atomic energy of his granddaughter.

Star of satirical poetry. Peter Bakowski and Ken Bolton, *The Elsewhere Variations*:

Richmond footballer Dusty Martin, known for his reticence with the media, was sent to interview Clive. All he came back with was a one-sentence quote: “I sculpt fog with a steak knife.”

Geordie Williamson, *The Australian*, October 5:

... it was only ... the growing awareness of the enduring grief he felt at his father’s loss (when he was a boy), bolstered by the sense of his own illness and mortality, that unravelled the artful, jokey, egocentric projections he had played to the hilt for so long. This is a hard and creditable turn in awareness. It served to deepen his poetry ...

From his poem *Landfall*:

What is it worth, then, this insane last phase / When everything about you goes downhill? / This much: you get to see the cosmos blaze / And feel its grandeur, even against your will, / As it reminds you, just by being there, / That it is here we live, or else nowhere.

John Greening, *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 10, 2017:

Verbal dexterity, a pungent wit and extraordinary metaphorical inventiveness are surface characteristics of his exuberant writing but behind the facade of frivolity he is often both erudite and serious. Notwithstanding his reputation as an expatriate metropolitan critic, his style and humour have been recognised as quintessentially Australian and have led him to be described, not necessarily unkindly, as “the highbrow coming on as Chips Rafferty”.