

# Clive James's words 'caught the light'

EDITORIAL

---



By **THE AUSTRALIAN EDITORIAL**,  
12:00AM NOVEMBER 29, 2019 •  COMMENTS

Armed with confidence, wit and the talent to “turn a phrase until it catches the light”, Clive James sailed out of Sydney Heads on New Year’s Eve, 1961, determined to make a mark. He did. And it was indelible — as a poet, essayist, novelist, autobiographer, interviewer, television critic and commentator. He and his generation of brash expatriates — Bruce Beresford, Carmen Callil, Barry Humphries, Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes and Madeleine St John, among many — “inhabited the cultural world as if they had been born in it, and nowhere else”, James recalled later.

His eclectic cultural landscape touched the heights of scholarship and the breadths of populism. It ranged across his lauded translation of Dante Alighieri’s 14th-century narrative poem, *The Divine Comedy*, to his TV recounts of absurd Japanese game shows. From Rome to Rio and points between, the laconic, self-deprecating humour of his Postcard documentaries won him a new generation of Australian fans in the early 1990s.

For better and worse, James was an out-and-out romantic. And like many of the best and brightest who strive to make the world their oysters, his family paid a price, which he readily admitted. Admiring the paintings of his daughter Claerwen four years ago, he sensed the “great loneliness” in some of them. He realised in an honest, painful admission that “I may be largely responsible for that”. In later years James poured such regrets into his poems. He used his final decade, the Indian summers after his diagnosis with a terminal illness, to seek redemption and succour by recapturing some of his lost family time.

The gap he could not fill was that of his father, Albert, who died in an air crash returning home after World War II, having survived a prisoner-of-war camp and forced labour in Japan. As James wrote after visiting Albert’s grave in a Hong Kong war cemetery: “Back at the gate, I turn to face the hill, / Your headstone lost again among the rest. / I have no time to waste, much less

to kill. / My life is yours; my curse to be so blessed.” In a 2015 postscript to *Unreliable Memoirs*, his fictionalised life story, James acknowledged fulfilment and joy in “the things he must have wanted for me when he went away to fight”. In that sense, he wrote, the true subject of the book was “a nation and not a growing boy”. James remained Australian to the bootstraps. The sight of “umbrellas commiserating with each other” on misty London afternoons made him think of Sydney, “twelve thousand miles away and ten hours from now” and of yachts “racing on the crushed diamond water under a sky the texture of powdered sapphires”. For him, the “birthplace of the fortunate” sent out “invisible waves of recollection” and always would “until even the last of us come home”. May his soaring spirit rest in peace.