

# Uni mentors remained dear to Clive James's heart

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By **HELEN TRINCA**, MANAGING EDITOR

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Clive James always acknowledged the place of *Honi Soit*, the Sydney University student magazine, in his literary formation. And he recognised, too, the importance of two men — Philip Graham and John Cummings — who helped start his career on the paper in the 1950s.

He gave them pseudonyms in his first book: Cummings was Keith Cameron and Graham, who was known as Chester on campus, was Spencer.

Yesterday, Cummings, who transitioned in 1986 and is now Katherine Cummings, spoke from her home on the NSW central coast about the young man she first met in 1957.

“I was working in the university library and Chester came in and said there was a young freshman who had arrived who seemed to have ideas and might be able to write,” the 84-year-old said.

The subsequent meeting with James was recorded in her autobiography, *Katherine's Diary*: “He (James) looked far too athletic and much too innocent to belong to our group of cynical aesthetes. He wore a perpetual grin and bounced when he walked, like a Newfoundland puppy who hadn't been exercised enough. He was, however, intelligent and witty and listened. We loved him for listening.”

Soon the three young men would spend hours together talking about books and writing, as well as producing satirical material for the paper. Campus contemporaries saw Chester, in particular, as a mentor to the young kid from Kogarah.

In his 1980 book *Unreliable Memoirs*, James wrote of that time: “I suppose that first year at university was just about the most ridiculous phase of my life. It was love again, for course, but this time I was in love with all of them. I copied Spencer's walk, talk and gestures. I copied the way he wrote. I copied the way Keith Cameron read ...”

Five years later, when James wrote another volume of autobiography, *Falling Towards England*, he dedicated it to “Chester and John Cummings”.

James's journey from Honi Soit neophyte to global cultural giant was no real surprise to Cummings: “He was witty, he was very bright, he practised hard. He was brave. He starved.

“He had a very bad period before he clicked with *The Observer* and became its TV critic (in 1972). But there was so much more to him than that. He was a scholar.”

Like James, Graham headed overseas after university and spent decades in Italy, Portugal and Brazil. A talented linguist and translator, he returned to Australia in 2000 and now lives in inner Sydney.

On Thursday, he told *The Australian* that while people assumed there was a close relationship between the two, he was not an intimate friend of James and was surprised to discover on his return to Australia that he was such a celebrity.

The two had briefly collaborated in a satirical review at the Lyric Theatre in London's - Hammersmith in the 1960s but had not kept in touch. “I didn't know anything about his success, I was so far out of the Anglosphere for so long,” he said.

A couple of years ago, with news of James's illness, Graham reached out, sending James a poem he had written for him. “I was very happy to do that, very pleased that he accepted it,” Graham said — although he declined to release it to *The Australian*.

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