

NATIONAL BOOK COUNCIL

FIRST LITERARY LUNCHEON, 1981

MELBOURNE HILTON, TUESDAY 24 MARCH 1981

INTRODUCTION OF MR. ROBERT HUGHES

The Hon. Mr. Justice Kirby
President of the National Book Council

April 1981 .

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Rudimentary Facts

The rudimentary facts of the life and career of Robert Hughes can be told briefly.

He was born in Sydney in 1938. He is the son of a famous legal family. His father was a lawyer and something of a war hero and gallant. He is the brother of a famous Queen's Counsel, the Honourable Thomas Hughes Q.C., who rose to be Federal Attorney-General and is reputed to be one of the 'biggest earners' of the Australian Bar. At this very moment, he is somewhere, not far from here, in a court, earning a fabulous fee, whilst we sit here eating.

As a boy, young Robert Hughes was surrounded in his home in Rose Bay, Sydney, with nice things. But there was not much art in the home. A few Lindsay etchings were banished to the pantry, for reasons we had best not explore, but can imagine.

Robert Hughes was educated by the Jesuits at St. Ignatius College, Sydney. He came up to the University with a brilliant school record. That was in 1956: 25 years ago. With a curl of the lip, he says that but for his father's death when he was 12, he would have ended up a lawyer. I take this to be, in his eyes, a fate too horrible to imagine.

At the University of Sydney, he forsook the life of orthodoxy. He fell in with the 'honi soit' set and from the first day, took an active part in the student newspaper. Weekly, his cartoons decorated the pages of that journal. Witty and sharp they were and he soon became the regular scourge of the University establishment and the enemy of everything crass and banal.

He failed Arts I, though many boring people passed. Later he dropped out of the School of Architecture. No University testamurs decorate his walls.

Robert Hughes, failed student, became the art critic of the Sydney Morning Herald. He went overseas. After a period of poverty and penury which was mercifully short, he became another of our famous expatriates. He took over and still maintains the weekly column on art in the international Time magazine. He has compared important and brilliant television productions. And now he has authored an important new book, 'The Sheek of the New', to interpret the art of our time to the mass audience of our time.

25 YEARS ON

1956 was a mixed year. The Time covers, from which one can recall the images of a year, tell it all. There was Sir Antony Eden. There was the ill-starred Marilyn. Rex Harrison succeeded Adlai and the fated Dag. Richard Nixon was there, Vice-President, and still to face his biggest crises. Gamal Abdul Nasser dominated the year.

But for Robert Hughes, and for me, 1956 was the year we came up to the University of Sydney. Do you recall it, Robert Hughes? 25 years ago this month.

I recollect Robert on his first day at University and my memory of him was rekindled this year when I read Clive James' 'Unreliable Memoirs': a brilliant, witty, nostalgic book, published by Jonathan Cape.

Chapter 13 of that book bears the University title 'Let Us Rejoice, Therefore'. The words, taken, of course, from the old song, 'Gaudeamus Igitur' presage the joy which the young Clive James felt when he came up to the University. After describing his arrival in his school blazer, wearing his Presbyterian Fellowship badge, his encounter with a sex lecture and his passionate desire to secure a pair of 'brothel creepers' (which he found, to his disappointment, were merely soft boots), Clive James tells of his special secret pleasure:

Every time it all became too much I retreated to my bolt-hole in the Union reading room and looked at honi soit again. The cartoons were amazingly good. They were signed 'Huggins'. Everybody who counted seemed to have only one name.

C. James, Unreliable Memoirs, Jonathan Cape, London, 1980, p.127.

But then young Clive described his first encounter with his hero. Listen to the description. See if you can recognise the famous man, 25 years on.

The meeting came during a discussion with the honi soit set about favourite authors:

Who was my idea of a good modern novelist? I said Nicholas Monsarrat. There were snorts all round at this. All present snorted audibly. Wanda snorted visibly. Spencer cast his eyes to the sky.

ibid, p.130.

But fortunately for his career as a literary critic, Clive James' snort-provoking assertion was interrupted by the arrival of the famous 'Huggins':

Through the gate walked the most artistic-looking young man I had ever seen in my two days' experience of artistic young men. He was all pale suede and corduroy. The ends of a loosely knit scarf dangled almost to the ground. He had a folio under his arm. Surrounding a face so handsome it was like a cartoon, his hair was blond and abundant. He was smoking a cigarette about two feet long. Within seconds he was seated, sipping at a beer glass held in one hand while he sketched with the other. He did a group sketch of everybody present. I was staggered — by the speed of his hand, by the quality of what it produced, and by the fact that I was included in the result, which I was allowed to keep. That night I pasted it on to my wall at home, airily explaining to my mother that it was the work of my friend Huggins, whom I knew quite well, since he was a close acquaintance of mine, and had in fact sat beside me during a vitally important meeting. ...

ibid, p.130.

WELCOME AND INVITATION

Well, here he is again: sitting beside us. He is at once a chronicler and agent of change. Let us therefore rejoice in the success of his career. Let us welcome to the First Literary Luncheon for 1981 Robert Hughes — a civilised Australian.