

## Stuart O. Pierson (1934-2001)

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# Stuart O. Pierson (1934-2001)

ROBERT PAINE

BUT FOR MINOR EDITORIAL ADJUSTMENTS what appears here is the text of an eulogy in honour of Stuart O. Pierson, delivered to a crowded gathering of Stuart's family, colleagues, students and friends on the evening of 17th April in the Faculty Club of Memorial University.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

Bart, you know the first thing I remember your Dad saying to me was “*bullshit!*” — a long time ago, before you were born. It was at the dinner table of David and Ann Alexander. He was probably quite right, your dad, on that as on many other things: I probably *was* talking “*bullshit.*” But I promise to try to do better over the next few minutes.

I want to tell you something about the gifts he dispensed to his friends and colleagues and students. The gift of his spoken presence and the gift of his written presence.

\* \* \*

It's evening. I open the street door at 70 Prescott, and, more often than not, I see him sitting in his corner chair at the kitchen table down the end of the corridor. With a passing “hi” to the “Johnny Burke lived here” plaque, I enter. Throw a second “hi,” pull up a chair at the kitchen table, and —perhaps elbowing the *Oxford Concise Dictionary* or an encyclopaedia of opera and nudging aside a library book or two or a newly purchased novel — I sit down. A glass is set before me. To purloin a phrase, I've come to the Socratic Café!

Two hours later (perhaps), I say “have to go, Stuart” — or perhaps it's Jean or Peter, Bill or Caroline who has to go: the Socratic Café has a clientele. “No, says

Stuart, “we’re not finished ... you still have to make clear ...” or “I [Stuart] can explain what I’ve been saying another way ...”

Sometimes there’s a meal in preparation and Stuart the philosopher-cum-chef stands over the kitchen stove — right next to the table. Succulent omelettes! Delicious baccalao! But, Stuart reluctant to follow the mundane instructions on the Kraft Dinner packages, the children, Bart and Rosanna, fare less well!

\* \* \*

You’re wondering what we talked about? Well, let’s look at the “fare” we find in his writings in the *Newfoundland Quarterly* and *Newfoundland Studies*, for here “our” world and “the” world (of whatever epoch) engage each other. The vehicle for these exercises is Stuart’s reviews of the books, paintings, photography, poetry and music of the likes of Ray Guy, Richard Gwyn, John Steffler, Christopher Pratt, Ben Hansen, Gerry Squires, Wayne Johnston, Des Walsh, Mary Pratt, Harold Horwood, Farley Mowat, John De Visser, Antonia McGrath, Mary Dalton, Ron Hynes, E. Annie Proulx. And the “supporting caste” in these reviews include the likes of Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Thucydides, E.M. Forster, Aristotle, R.G. Collingwood, Dylan Thomas, Emily Dickinson ... and the lord only knows who else.

And so it was given to this CFA to alert us all (CFAs and native-born) to the creative treasury he found in his adopted land — even as he exposed “puffery” wherever he might find it. An heir (and then some) to Johnny Burke was indeed living at 70 Prescott!

There was usually a point behind a point with Stuart. One recurring theme across the kitchen table was the relation between “history” and “imagination.” And just the other day, I came across this in a novel I was reading — but too late to discuss it with Stuart: “I guess when you look at it ... one meaning can be true and the other accurate.”<sup>2</sup> Stuart would have loved that, wouldn’t he? This brings to mind an occasion that, I think, says so much about Stuart’s approach to “learning” and to “teaching” as *exploration*.

Two young Norwegians were my house-guests for a few days some years back. Let’s call them “Norwegian #1” and “Norwegian #2.” They’d been exploring North America and were now on their way home. They were trying to decide whether to enter university, back in Norway. To tell the truth, they didn’t seem to have much idea of what a university is; so, as a “taster” I arranged for them to “sit in” on a Stuart Pierson lecture. “Well,” I asked them afterwards, “what did you make of it?” Norwegian #1 had not been impressed.

Norwegian #1: “If this is what goes on, I’m not bothering with university.”

Me: “How so?”

Norwegian #1: “He kept striding back and forth; he was never still, just like his talk. It was meant to be ‘history’ but he turned it into ‘invention’!”

Norwegian #2: "*Exactly!* It was exciting as hell!"

Me: "Really, how so?"

Norwegian #2: "Professor Pierson spoke about the 'what ifs' in history. For example, 'what if' just before Ferdinand and Isabella commissioned Columbus' voyage of 'discovery' to 'Cathay,' a document arrives to the effect that a court visit from an emissary of the Great Khan is imminent! What might have been the implications for 'our' history if such had transpired? Pierson enthralled me as — yes! striding back and forth — he explored and elaborated his theme. Hypothesis was followed by counter-hypothesis ... back and forth! My mind raced."

Norwegian #2 enrolled at the University of Oslo on his return home.

\* \* \*

I've left no time for the early MUN film society (with Alice Story at the piano for those "silent" films) and the "jockey club" (no, not horses, philosophers!) and his wrestling with Isaac Newton's Second Law. Instead, I'm drawn unavoidably to the puzzle of quite what was the secret of the blessing Stuart bestowed?

Others will fathom it better than I. But I think I *do* know this: We each love Stuart. Perhaps, naturally enough, we each, sometimes, see him as "ours" in a special way. But would we not all agree that a great part of what was "special" about Stuart was the *similar* way in which he influenced us all. To wit: he brought us further along the path of our own imaginings, of our idea-makings. Just the other day a one-time graduate student of his told me how Stuart gave him the confidence to do what he wanted to do — and that's what's important (Stuart would assert): what *you* want to do. It was so "incredibly affirming," the graduate said.

He, Stuart, was one of the few through whom the notion of the university as an intellectual debating club was kept alive: for him, the fences separating academic disciplines had to be jumped over, and he did just that. Universities are in the habit of making some of their professors "emeritus." Now, if ever there is an "emeritus" among us, it is Stuart. And I have a proposal: That this university — to which he gave so much — awards Stuart Pierson a doctoral degree, *honoris causa*.

\* \* \*

And so to close: Dear Janet, and Max and Zanda and Bart and Rosanna, you must know that Stuart was, for all of us, without compare. And just as important: he still is and will always be so.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>I wish to thank my wife Rachel, Gordon Inglis, and Judy Adler for their readings of paragraphs in the making.

<sup>2</sup>Alistair Macleod, *No Great Mischief*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999, p. 97.