

Classic Poetry Series

Arthur Alexander Banning
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Arthur Alexander Banning(27 June 1921 - 2 November 1965)

Arthur Alexander (Lex) Banning was an Australian lyric poet. Disabled from birth by cerebral palsy, he was unable to speak clearly or to write with a pen. "Yet he overcame his handicap to produce poems which were often hauntingly beautiful and frequently ironic, and gave to other, younger poets a strong sense of the importance and value of their calling". Such younger poets included Clive James, Les Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann.

Early Life

A note on sources

By good fortune, one of Banning's closest friends was the late Richard Appleton ("Appo"), a bohemian writer and raconteur who met the poet in Sydney's Lincoln coffee lounge, about 1950. Appleton later became editor-in-chief of the Australian Encyclopaedia and, in 1983, was co-editor with Alex Galloway of the posthumous Banning collection *There Was a Crooked Man* which includes reliable biographical information. In writing this, Appleton received the benefit of access to a collection of letters in the possession of Dr Anne Banning.

Birth and disability

Lex Banning was born on 27 June 1921 in Royal North Shore Hospital, Sydney, son of Arthur Antoine Banning, a waiter from Belgium who later became a theatre proprietor, and his native-born wife Helma Louise, née Hall, of Scots and Swedish descent. As a result of a difficult birth, the infant suffered from athetoid cerebral palsy, a spastic condition against which he was to struggle all his life. Lex's 'own particular demon', as he called it in a poem, was involuntary movement of the arms, neck, face and legs which made him grimace and stagger, distorted his speech, but left his intellect and creativity unimpaired. His disability was cerebral palsy of a type brought about by insufficiency of oxygen in the bloodstream during or soon after birth. Though this resulted in little or no intellectual impairment, he was afflicted by involuntary movements and poor co-ordination of arms, neck and face, because of which his speech was laboured and hard to understand. The disabilities were ultimately no barrier to effective communication nor to the respect and admiration of people who knew him.

Education and early career

The family home was in the Sydney suburb of Punchbowl and Lex attended ordinary state primary and secondary schools through which he acquired superior reading skills and was introduced to encyclopedias. His father died when Lex was aged 4; thereafter Banning mostly lived at Punchbowl with his mother. Although he attended public schools, and was able to read though not to write, the boy could not sit normally in class. For the most part he was left to educate himself by such means as perusing encyclopaedias. Though denied a full secondary education, at age sixteen Banning was found employment at Sydney Observatory; during three or four years there he learned to type. Little is known of his life for four years after leaving the observatory, except that all his teeth were extracted.

In 1944 Lex Banning was admitted as an unmatriculated student to the faculty of arts at the University of Sydney. Over the next five years he distinguished himself scholastically, dictating all his exam papers, and became a notable figure on campus and at such downtown coffee lounges as Repin's and Lincoln Inn. Another of his haunts was the Royal George, a hotel frequented by the libertarian 'Push', where Banning drank unsteadily but to good effect. He was an active and enthusiastic participant in university affairs, including writing for and editing university publications. A poem of his, 1946, appeared in the 1946 university Arts Society annual *Arna*, a magazine he also edited, and in 1949 Banning co-edited the student newspaper, *Honi Soit*. That year he graduated with second-class honours in English and history.

Later career and associations

Later, Banning worked as a librarian at the Spastic Centre while also writing for print, radio, film and television. He was a regular associate of Sydney Push and media personalities including close friend and biographer Richard Appleton, Joy Anderson, Robert Hughes, Piers Bourke, John Croyston, Mike and Marjorie Hourihan and Brian Jenkins. Accomplished jazz musician Ray Price and his distinguished wife Nadine Amadio were also close friends.

Poetry

For Lex Banning, the fundamental task of poetry was compression, to which end the poet's skills and artifices were instrumental. He greatly admired the Japanese haiku form and its supreme exponent, Matsuo Basho; and the Alexandrian Greek poet C P Cavafy. To a lecturer who described poetry as "not the wine but the brandy of literature", Banning sternly interjected: "Not the brandy. . . the cognac!". For, notwithstanding his own physical disability, Banning was the

toughest of critics and no respecter of personalities. His acerbic wit was frequently expressed in blunt conversation, and some of his satirical verse did not bear publication for that reason.

Banning's sardonic appearance—austere lips enclosed by a short, dark beard and moustache, sharp nose, tired, deep-set eyes and a widow's-peak hairline—was well matched by his mocking sense of humour and by his disillusioned poetry which sometimes verged on nihilism. His work, published in *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Bulletin*, was collected in three books: *Everyman His Own Hamlet* (1951), *The Instant's Clarity* (1952) and *Apocalypse in Springtime and Other Poems* (1956). Although despairing, Banning's verse was, in the judgement of one critic, 'the product of a brilliant mind, agile wit and passionate heart'.

Galloway observes that "the purity of the poem remains his concern as he expunges the element of self-expression in favour of the universal" and invites consideration of these lines from *The Dark Soul* (1951):

The dark soul goes lonely,
it seeks, but cannot find
its heart's desire among the whirling
planets of the mind.

For mind is as a universe,
a bounded, boundless place,
but a prison to the dark soul
that never finds its grace;

not though it search for ever,
or the small space of a breath,
for the soul is immortal,
and what it seeks is death.

Galloway concludes: "[I]n compiling this collection, I have come to understand his appeal. His sculptured verse is wrought from figures of the past, from acute seeing in the now, from awareness of the significance of shadows which give meaning and dimension to the structure of images. You may hear the voice of thought, see the vision of clear sight, feel the brooding presence of an entity beyond the immediate grasp of the mind, and glimpse the monstrous and the beautiful apprehension allowed to a poet".

Last years

In the early 1950s Banning worked as librarian at the Spastic Centre, Mosman. He went to London and, soon after arriving there, on 27 January 1962 at the register office, Lambeth, married 26-year-old Anne Agatha Ferry, a medical practitioner and friend from Sydney. Through senior medical contacts who admired his poetry, Banning was invited to visit the Aegean Islands aboard a luxury yacht and develop his interest in paleontology and his love of the work of Constantine P. Cavafy. However, the marriage foundered and Banning returned to Sydney in 1964, to live alone in a small flat at Darlinghurst. They separated soon afterwards, and Banning again took up residence at his mother's home where, on 2 November 1965, he died of 'poisoning self-administered—no evidence accidentally or otherwise'. He was buried in the Presbyterian section of Rookwood cemetery. In the words of his poem, 'Nursery Rhyme', evoking the crooked man who walked a crooked mile, Banning had 'reached his crooked mile's end' and been 'straightened out by death'.

Nursery Rhyme (Crooked But Wise)

There was a crooked man
Who walked a crooked mile,
While the crooked hands ran backwards
Around the crooked dial.
He found his crooked journey
Led him through a crooked town,
Where all his crooked neighbours
Were running up and down,
And conducting crooked business
In crooked shops and stalls,
While their shadows capered crookedly
Upon the crooked walls,
So he followed their example
And, as he passed along,
Sold his birthright for a fortune:
He had got it for a song.
He thought he had a bargain,
And was overheard to say,
'That sometime every crooked dog
Must have his day.'
But even as he said it,
And drew a crooked breath,
He reached his crooked mile's end
And was straightened out by death.

Arthur Alexander Banning