

James R. Lawler – My Uncle Jimmy

In my childhood Uncle Jimmy (James Lawler) was a real family hero. My mother's double cousin, he and my mother were like brother and sister, the bond having been reinforced with my mother having lived with her aunt (James' mother) for a while after her own mother fell ill and again for some time after she died. My earliest memory of Uncle Jimmy was of this 'very clever' member of our family; my mother certainly idolised him and the feeling was passed on to the children. My mother had lost her real brother Percy during the war (he died a prisoner of the Japanese on the Thai Burma railway.) I have a memory of Uncle Jimmy coming to visit us when I was about four years old. It must have been in early 1951 just before he headed off to Paris and the Sorbonne. Some time later, ahead of one of Uncle Jimmy's visits, my mother reminded me of how intelligent he was and urged me to save up my questions for him. I must have been about 6 years old. Anyway, I was a bit disappointed when Uncle Jimmy was not able to give me an answer to either of my saved questions. As brilliant and informed as James was, I think my mother had been a little unfair expecting him to have answers to absolutely anything I came up with. In any event, that did not diminish his status. He truly had a presence about him - even without my mother's promotion. I remember being in awe of this man who seemed so tall and had this especially charming voice and gentle nature. I recall thinking that his special voice must be a sign of an 'educated man.'

In any event, he was both studious and sporting - indeed he was very studious. By the time he got to high school, he was already deeply interested in French; part of the family mythology was that even after his mother turned the bedroom light out at night and told him to go to sleep, he kept reading his French texts under the blankets by torchlight.

James' family had moved from Kallista in the Dandenongs outside Melbourne in late 1930s to make a new home at 16 Union St Windsor. The house was called 'Childers'. This was an important move as James was able to go to Melbourne High School from there in the early 1940s. I certainly visited 16 Union St a number of times with my parents when I was very young. I do not recall seeing James there. But I do recall seeing his tiny soft-top Morris car parked in the very tight 'driveway' at the front of the house. So tight in fact that James' father (Uncle Jim) had cut a section out of the fence post so that the right-hand mudguard could squeeze past into the available space. Anyway, the car, the neat little tailor-made parking space, and James not being home - all these little things somehow added to the mystique surrounding my Uncle Jimmy.



My mother and me at 'Childers' 16 Union St Windsor where James Lawler lived with his parents Jim and Kath in the 1940s.

(The house was still there when I last looked a few years ago; it appeared to be vacant and looked quite run down.)

The years 1951-1954 were especially pivotal in James' life; he gained his doctorate in French literature from the Sorbonne over that period and immediately after that he married a French woman, Christiane Labossiere, in Paris. Although James and Christiane travelled back to Australia, where James took up various academic posts around the country over the next 15 years, there was still this sense that their base was in Paris. In the years that followed, letters to my mother keep us up to date on the adventures of Uncle Jimmy and Christiane. Their two children Ariane and Jerome were born in 1960 and so they became part of the adventure. We heard from them in the US (UCLA, U of Chicago), Canada (Halifax?), and Japan and, of course, in between times, Paris. (James told me not so long ago about the time he and Christiane lived for a while in an idyllic world on Ile Saint-Louis.)

There was a period from 1988 onwards when I had very little news about James and Christiane. I worked in Saudi Arabia for 6 years and after that I spent a considerable amount of time living and working in Laos. In 2003, however, I made a special trip to France with one major task in mind and that was to catch up with my Uncle Jimmy.

As was always the case, the way to make contact with James was by letter. So letters were exchanged and arrangements were made for me to see James and Christiane in Paris when I got there. Sadly, by the time I arrived, Christiane was not well and was not able to join us. James proposed we have lunch at Le Procope, which I quickly gathered was a significant place for him. Our rendezvous was on a Sunday and he said he would wait for me at the foot of the statue of Danton near the Odeon Metro station. It was a moving moment for me as I came up out of the Metro. James was standing there at the top of the stairs beneath the statue dressed in brown corduroy slacks, tweed jacket and...he was wearing a tie. He could have easily slipped back into Queens College c.1950. On my part, I felt a little under-dressed.

That Sunday – lunch and the walk afterwards – proved to be a monumental event for me. I was given a master class in James Lawler and his connection with Paris. Not in any particular order, we covered things from 1951 to the present. I heard the multitude of stories. One reason Le Procope had been proposed by James was because it was where the Friends of Rimbaud met each month and James was the President of that association at the time. Of course, there were also Le Procope stories. After lunch he proposed where we could walk that might interest me. And as we walked he told stories. It was Verlaine's birthday. We finished at the Poet's market in the forecourt of St Sulpice.

Over the next 7 or 8 years I made this trip to Paris twice more. Each time I met up with James we followed the same ritual; he proposed a suitable place for lunch and we went for a walk afterwards. Each time a different walk; each time different stories. He had so much of interest to share. I wish he had written it all down. Christiane died in 2005, not surprisingly a real blow to James; I never got to see her in Paris.

I should mention that in one of our chats in Paris James confirmed my memory and my understanding of the section cut out of the fence post at 16 Union St Windsor (see above), some 60 years after.

By 2010 my life was changing. I was destined to marry a French woman. I was particularly keen for Anne and James to meet. So when we were next heading to Paris, to achieve the desired meeting I proposed lunch and invited James to Le Procope. By this stage, James was suffering a few health problems, more than I had realised. But he insisted that he would be alright. It was a wonderful meeting. I think he was tickled pink that I was marrying a French woman, and especially one with Anne's cultural background. Anne gave him a copy of a novel she had had published. (He subsequently reported that he had read every word of it (the energy of the man) and had delighted in

it, encouraging Anne to write more. Anne in turn was truly impressed by this Australian who was so well acquainted with French literature; who could so readily recite multiple lines of poetry all with an amazing passion. (Anne of course had met many Australians visiting Villers-Bretonneux, but in that context had not been exposed to the characteristics obviously found in this particular Australian.)

When next I saw James I asked him where home was for him now. (This was a question from the heart as I was following his footsteps in a way.) I liked his answer. He said that Australia was his *spiritual* home. He said that whenever he was back in Melbourne and the opportunity presented he would go back to Kallista where he lived as a child with his family and where his mother ran the Arcadia Guest House. There was a bend in the road, a bridge over a creek (Begley's Bridge, I think) that had hardly changed since he was a boy. That to him was where he could feel all that was spiritual for him, where the memories came flooding back. But he said he could never live in Melbourne again. As passionate as he was about Australia and as interested as he still was in the country and its doings, for all practical purposes time had passed him by.



Arcadia Guesthouse in Kallista
in 1949, about 10 years after
James and his family left their
home here and moved to
Windsor.

As for Paris, he said that now it was his *real* home. It was where his life was now, where his living friends were, where his current interests were. It was important for him, for example, to be able to go down to the Café Empire at the end of rue Michel Ange for coffee, simply to meet some friend – old or new - down there for a chat. And plainly, he still had a role to play in the very active pursuit of French literature.

Anne and I visited James at home in rue Michel Ange a number of times. And we did manage one more lunch at Le Procope on 4th June 2012.



James R Lawler at the Maison de Mallarmé, Vulaines-sur-Seine, photograph by Jean-Claude Martin 2012

The last time we saw him was in April 2013. Despite his failing health, he had been especially energised that day. Just the week previous, he told us he had been visited by an historian from the National Library of Australia/National Archives. This bloke spent probably 8 hours interviewing James over two days for an oral history he was compiling. Despite what must have been the gruelling nature of these sessions given his condition, James was clearly pleased with what had happened. In hindsight it was one of those things he needed to do before he left this world. On our last visit, we talked about many things as usual. Again, he was so in touch with what was going on in the world. The good bye this time was noticeably more emotional than any previous. He thanked me for all the visits and especially for bringing Anne to see him. We said a few times, ‘next time.’ But, no, that really was the last time we saw him.

James Lawler died in Paris on Sunday 28th July 2013, aged 83. Far too soon. He would have been 84 on 15th August. His daughter Ariane phoned me to let me know. She said he had gone

off his medication some days earlier because it was proving counterproductive. On the Sunday morning he had had a proper shave and his hair had been nicely combed as he would have liked it. He was sitting up in bed, alert and in particularly good spirit. Ariane said he died peacefully. No doubt with great dignity.

On Monday 6th August James R. Lawler was laid to rest in Père Lachaise Cemetery with his wife Christiane. The ceremony at the crematorium on that Monday was a rather modest event, with maybe 25 people present. (If you die in Paris between 14 July and 15 August you are unlikely to have many people come to your funeral because they are all on holidays somewhere out of Paris.) I met up with James’ children, Jerome and Ariane, just before the ceremony. Ariane had come from Montreal, Canada a few weeks earlier, one of her increasingly frequent visits to see her father in Paris as his health worsened. So she had been very much involved in all that had been happening. Jerome had arrived from Melbourne the previous Wednesday, having flown over after his father’s death. The priest who led the service did not know James but he did a particularly good job in the circumstances. The service ended with people saying or reading a few words. The message was clear. James was a great and humble man who cared for others. Immediately afterwards, I met a couple of people who separately told me that James had been the inspiration in their lives: Charlotte (?), who was a student of James in Perth in the mid-60s. She had come to France, married a Frenchman and now lives in

Paris; also Arnaud Coulombel, a Frenchman who had been a student of James at Chicago University around 1990 and now heads up the Chicago University campus in Paris.

I had lunch with James' children a few hours later, just near the cemetery. They both said that before he died their father could not stop talking about the wonderful times he had chatting with Anne and me over the last year or so. That gave me some joy on a sad day. We talked much about their father, squeezing a lot into a short time. The 'family reunion', as Jerome called, it had to break up, he and Ariane having to return to collect their father's ashes at 3pm. After parting company, I wandered off through the greater part of the cemetery (where no ashes lie.) For the rest of the day I did a few things in Paris that reminded me of those times I had spent with James - dinner on the quai opposite Notre Dame, a few walks and a few gardens. The most poignant was in the Jardin du Vert-Galant – the very heart of Paris, James said. I found an empty quai. No one there. He really had gone.



6 August 2013 – the day of James Lawler's funeral and the empty quai...

I am sorry James did not live a lot longer. We still had so much to talk about. I am happy though that we managed to grab some precious time with him before he left.

I headed out of Paris later the next day.

Peter Evans, December 2014