

Vale John Bangsund

by Stephanie Holt

Just as this newsletter was being finalised, news reached us that John Bangsund had died, at 81, on 22 August. John had been in poor health for some years, but it was the coronavirus that took him in the end. Our thoughts are with his wife, Sally Yeoland, his wider family and his many friends.

While fuller appreciations and memories will undoubtedly flow over coming months, an initial tribute is in order.

John was a legendary editor, indeed an editor's editor (or is that *editors' editor*? John would have had some thoughts on that), and an Honorary Life Member of the Victorian Society of Editors. Those who didn't work with him might know him as the inventor of Muphry's Law (more on that later), as editor of the Victorian Society of Editors newsletter for many years, or as a writer of marvellous columns and essays. A lovely example of his writing — once a staple of trainee editor reading lists — is [*On Looking It Up: A Ramble on Books and Editing*](#), first published in *Meanjin* in 1994.

After early theological studies, John's path through publishing took on varied roles: Hansard subeditor, publisher's sales rep and *Meanjin* Assistant Editor among them, and many years as a freelance editor. He won the Barbara Ramsden Award from the Fellowship of Australian Writers for editing Lloyd Robson's *A History of Tasmania*, published by Oxford University Press. Among writers who have paid tribute to his skill is novelist Kerry Goldsworthy, who tweeted, 'John Bangsund was the only editor who ever let me get away with a page-long sentence, because he understood exactly what I was trying to do with it. He was a fantastic editor and a very funny man'.

John wrote about the Barbara Ramsden award ceremony in 1984 in his typical self-deprecatory, droll and delightedly name-droppy way: 'Suddenly it's over, and Gerald Murnane is saying, "You pompous bastard, Bangsund" but in a nice sort of way and Stephen Murray-Smith is beaming at me and a couple of kids who turn out to be science fiction fans ask for my autograph and it's compliments and flattery and smiles and all too much all the way.' You can find that account, and more from John, in *At the Typeface*, the anthology of Victorian Society of Editors newsletter selections edited by Janet Mackenzie.

For all his professional expertise, it was the energy, enthusiasm and erudition John brought to unpaid roles that had the widest impact. He was a key figure in the Australian and international science fiction scene, collecting, reviewing, promoting and producing fanzines from the early 1960s, and bringing the world (and Ursula K LeGuin) to Australia in 1975 for Aussiecon, the 33rd World Science Fiction Convention. This was fandom of the first order.

So, from science fiction fanzines to the Victorian Society of Editors newsletter.

The society was established in 1970. In 1978, John volunteered to edit its newsletter. His predecessor, Jim Hart, had produced a newsletter (quoting John) ‘informative, amusing, and short — rarely more than a single sheet’. John’s, by contrast, ‘would include matters of interest to our interstate members, such as reports on meetings, more news about individual members (with their consent, of course), and book reviews, and considered articles on publishing and editing, and illustrations. Even jokes, if clever enough.’

His description hints at, but hardly conveys, its importance. Under John, the newsletter — at times assembled on a table-tennis table on his back verandah, and mailed out using the card index of members he was required to maintain — became essential reading. The 1987 citation for John’s Honorary Life Membership of the Victorian society (one of the inaugural batch) calls it ‘an institution within Australian publishing’, and describes a ‘superb publication’ that provided ‘up-to-date information on technological developments in a confusingly changing period’. His much-loved column *The Threepenny Planet* gave full rein to his humour, wisdom and sense of fun.

John’s legacy included following generations of admiring and grateful editors, and ongoing connection with the society. Liz Steele (Victorian Society of Editors President 2005–11) remembers ‘a wonderful thinker and writer and analyser of words and their usage’, adding, ‘and his sense of humour was fab’. Jackey Coyle (President 2014–17) recalls: ‘John was in frequent contact during my time as President and (some time before that) as newsletter editor. His email headers rarely divulged the topic but always made me laugh. My favourite: “The ants are my friends, but not the nasty little green ones”.’

In 1988, John was Assistant Editor to Jenny Lee at *Meanjin*. Gerald Murnane was *Meanjin*’s fiction editor at the time, and stresses what a great achievement it was. The two had first met in 1961, as 22-year-olds taking a single night-school course in philosophy. As Gerald describes it: ‘We were like nineteenth-century men who went to mechanics institutes, autodidacts, trying to make our way in the world.’ Later John was assigned by Heinemann to proofread Gerald’s 1987 *Inland*, which turned into an epic competitive event, with galleys spread across the floor and an elaborate scoring system for errors each found and missed (and after all that, a dead-heat finish). Gerald could speak for many: ‘I loved him for his wit and his erudition. For taking the trouble to look things up. It was a delight to be in his company, so lively, and always humble.’

John remained at *Meanjin* as Editorial Consultant for a succession of later editors: Christina Thompson, me, Ian Britain. By the time I started editing *Meanjin* in 1998, John’s main contribution was to proofread each issue. A good proofreader has your back, and John had mine, absolutely. No slip of grammar, misunderstood reference, misused word or incorrect fact seemed to get past him. Four times a year, a package of proofs would be despatched, and in due course would reappear ‘tobacco-scented and wine-stained’, as *Meanjin* stalwart Tim Coronel recalled when we reminisced. John’s proofing was rigorous and scrupulous, his feedback generous, tactful and reassuring, his messages warm with wit and humour. His knowledge of literature, classical music, the Bible and so much more seemed boundless — though of course there was also that famed reference library at his hand. You were learning from him, every time. What a privilege.

That wit and wordplay is captured most succinctly in John's designation of 'Muphry's Law'. This is, of course, a mishap that had befallen the more familiar Murphy's Law. Despite care and effort, mistakes will sometimes occur. John set out his law's characteristics for the first time (they have been often reprinted) in the March 1992 newsletter, and it's worth restating them here:

(a) if you write anything criticising editing or proofreading, there will be a fault of some kind in what you have written; (b) if an author thanks you in a book for your editing or proofreading, there will be mistakes in the book; (c) the stronger the sentiment expressed in (a) and (b), the greater the fault; (d) any book devoted to editing or style will be internally inconsistent.

We editors didn't know we needed a name for all that, until we got one, and it's since caught on worldwide. (You can read US linguist and language columnist Ben Zimmer on Muphry's Law at [Language Log](#).)

In recent years, John took to Facebook, and many friends and like-minded people who'd crossed his path were treated to his regular photos and reminiscences, puns and parodies. Ever the fan, there were pictures of cats and cars, digressions into family history, recommendations for music and movies. And of course, still, ramblings on books and editing.

He made an immense contribution to our profession. He is an immense loss.

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