

**LEIGH DAVIS**

**(1955-2009)**

**Roger Horrocks**

The death of Leigh Davis on 3rd October at the age of 54 cut short a life that Leigh had always lived with exceptional energy, originality and zest. The amazing burst of creative work in his final year highlights the fact that his death from illness is a major loss to poetry and the visual arts.

The scope and experimental energy of Leigh's work make it unique in contemporary New Zealand poetry. I have always seen him as a great New Zealand original, comparable to a handful of innovators in the other arts such as Colin McCahon, Len Lye, Phil Dadson and et al. The extent to which this highly original writer was ignored or marginalised during his lifetime is likely to amaze future readers. Leigh was not interested in making the usual compromises; and rather than worry about the small audience for his work, he simply got on with the job, on the assumption that sooner or later people would find their way to it.

I first got to know him in the late 1970s at Auckland University. There was no doubt that this tall, high-powered student was exceptional. He was excited about ideas and highly articulate, with a unique turn of phrase. His mind functioned with extraordinary energy and lateral freedom. He retained a sophisticated enthusiasm for art and ideas throughout his life, never embracing the irony and cynicism that have cramped the style of some of his contemporaries.

He was as active physically as he was intellectually, and at his funeral there were many anecdotes from friends about his outdoor sporting activities – pushing himself to the limit, just as he did in his thinking and writing.

Leigh was also a dedicated family man. In 1980 he began a long and happy marriage to Susan Unwin whom he had met as a fellow student. They had four children - Greer, Henry, India and Betty - who all make vivid appearances in his writing. During Leigh's final illness, Susan played a crucial role by serving as an amanuensis and by preparing his final books for publication.

## Creative work

By the time Leigh left university at the end of the 1970s he was raring to go. He wrote:

I [had] discovered poetry.... It wasn't to have propositional clarity. It was an auditory warmth, not like the bars of a song but an excitement in representation, an ontological subversion.

In 1983 he wrote the long poem sequence *Willy's Gazette*. Self-published, it won the award for Best First Book of Poetry at the 1983 national book awards. In the following year he and his friend Alex Calder published the first issue of *And* magazine. The cover showed two cowboys bursting into a room brandishing six-shooters. The image was a photo from a shonky 1954 western entitled *The Man from God's Country*. Leigh's editorial in the first issue concluded: "And so we bring disaster to the tired New Zealand literature that we know.... We will tantalise our readers with troubling writing [and] escape their grasp in curious practices." He would ease up a little on the young rebel rhetoric, but essentially he would remain committed to this task of re-inventing literature right to the end of his life.

Where did his avant-garde energy and appetite come from? The influences (or inputs) began with modernism in all its forms - he loved its conceptual, experimental energy. His first models were American long poems such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Louis Zukovsky's *A*, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and John Berryman's *Dream Songs*. His excitement was fuelled by their size and ambition: "*The Cantos* is called a long poem - it should be called a *big* poem." Each of these "heroic forms of verbal art" was a world you could lose yourself in. Each reflected the variety of the poet's life and interests, and was flexible enough to accommodate letters and diaries, images and quotations. At the same time, they were far from autobiographical in any simple sense. When personal aspects were incorporated, the process of representation made them new and mysterious. Each of these long poems was a challenging read as "an all-sorts work, an omnibus." Leigh's own projects would follow that model.

He was also excited by many other "Old Masters" such as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. He read widely in Philosophy, with a particular interest in Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. And he felt a deep connection with the kinds of cultural theory associated with semiology. This was an intellectual revolution that arrived just at the right time for his generation. Leigh never flaunted his knowledge of semiology in a flashy way but it always underlay his thinking. His favourite theorist was Roland Barthes (in *Mythologies*), but he also liked to read Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and others. Semiology broke down

the boundaries between literature, painting, film, theatre and music by inter-relating them as systems of sign-based communication. (Pound had taken a similar approach in the *Cantos*, though inspired by the ideas of Ernest Fenollosa rather than those of Ferdinand de Saussure.)

Another interest, particularly strong in Leigh's later work, was religion. He had grown up in a very religious family (his father spent 4½ years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea) but Leigh rejected the more austere, fundamentalist aspects. He turned instead to Dante, St Augustine, and Renaissance painting. His eclectic interests extended to Eastern religions and to Te Kooti, the great Maori rebel leader, philosopher and song-writer, who had the creative energy to re-shape Christian and European traditions in new ways (such as the Ringatu religion).

I would like to list Leigh's main works – in addition to *And* - because they deserve to be much better known, and because together they indicate the scale of his achievement. He completed six major projects, innovative “omnibus” works in the *Cantos* tradition. Two involved visual exhibitions as well as books, so that one could speak of eight rather than six projects. The works are:

1983: *Willy's Gazette*, a poetic sequence of 97 linked sections.

1998: *Station of Earth-bound Ghosts*, a long omnibus work, a series of texts in the form of flags which were hung the length of Auckland's Central Railway Station concourse. The work incorporated many elements in juxtaposition but it was based primarily on Te Kooti. It was followed in 1999 by *Te Tangi a te Matuhi*, a remarkable book in a box, which combined reproductions of the flags with work by Maori and Pakeha contributors, and a CD of related music. Incidentally, these flags will be exhibited again during 2010 at Jar (589 New North Road, Kingsland, Auckland), a site for installation art established by Leigh.

2001: *The Book of Hours* was another extraordinary book in a box (with visual elements by artist John Reynolds). This long poem by Leigh was inspired by a yacht race and its patterns of movement. Reynolds translated the opening pages into an image that filled a large wall at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth.

2001: *General Motors* was an intense exploration of the way words interacted with an image. Leigh's sequence of poems focused on a 16<sup>th</sup> century painting by Garofalo (Benvenuto Tisi) of “Saint Nicholas of Tolentino Reviving the Birds.” *General Motors* was produced both as a sumptuous limited-edition book (a hand-made edition of five copies, each copy with unique features), and as an on-line, partly animated text on Leigh's website [jackbooks.com](http://jackbooks.com). The digital and physical versions each represented an experiment in bringing new energy to the genre of poetry and to the medium of

the book. Stephen Bambury also created an extraordinary copper sleeve which may be attached to a wall, both as an independent work of art and as a home for the physical book.

2006: *Anarchy* was an “omnibus” work presented as a text/image exhibition. Leigh spoke of it as a “theatre piece”. He later expanded it (with the help of a team that included Bambury) so that it became his most ambitious and complex experiment. It included music, performance and installations. Completed in 2009, it will hopefully be published this year. Bambury has compiled a companion volume, *Redux*, which will include a DVD realisation of *Nameless* in multi-media form.

2010: Leigh’s final poetry book, *Stunning Debut of the Repairing of a Life*, which consists of two long, related sequences, is scheduled to be published this year.

These six projects (in their multiple forms) were highly ambitious attempts to re-vitalise poetry and to extend the concept of the book. While still usefully regarded as poetry, these “omnibus” works incorporate a range of other elements such as notes and drafts, paintings, maps, flags, music, installations, performances, moving images, and digital media.

Leigh also contributed shorter poems to magazines such as *Parallax*, *Splash*, and *Brief Description of the Whole World*, which need to be collected one day. His essays on art represent another important body of work, which he planned to publish as a single collection under the title *Art Knowledge*. But ultimately it is the six major works that give his career its extraordinary scope and significance. All of them grew out of his impatience with the current state of New Zealand poetry, which seemed to him trivialised by its limited ambition and lack of experiments with language and representation. Poetry had narrowed its scope to the anecdotal experience of the individual poet who recorded modest daily insights in charming, verbal capsules. This persona, for all his or her feelings of bohemian freedom and lyrical enthusiasm, was producing poetry that took advantage of only a few octaves of the keyboard. Leigh had a life-time commitment to a different model – the long experimental poem – and he could not understand why so much contemporary poetry seemed simply to ignore the precedents and standards set by the great modernists.

Why is his own work so little known and its importance so under-rated? The insularity of the literary community seems to be reflected in the fact that so few local critics looked closely at what he was doing. (Overseas writers who took an interest in his work included Charles Bernstein, Marjorie Perloff, and the late Greg Denning.) Most of the New Zealand literary scene seemed to lose interest in Leigh’s writing after the 1980s (the period of *Willy’s Gazette* and the magazine *And*). His work was consigned to the too-hard-basket for several reasons – because he refused to keep to one genre, because his projects seemed more visual than verbal (even though his work was always primarily

verbal), and because of his conceptual and experimental energy. Leigh's business activities gave the local literary scene another excuse for ignoring his writing and ideas. He saw himself as being in good company on that score because two of his favourite writers – Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot – had also been successful businessmen.

Leigh's poetry was always hungry to expand beyond the page, onto the wall, into the air, or out to the Internet. He was increasingly drawn to the visual arts because they attached more importance to innovation than did the literary community. He also liked to collaborate with artists, designers, internet experts, and composers. His favourite approach was to round up a posse of other strong individuals to develop projects with him. His collaborators over the years included writers such as Wystan Curnow, artists such as John Reynolds and Stephen Banbury, designers such as Stephen Canning and Christine Hansen, and composers such as Phil Dadson and Alistair Galbraith, to mention just a few.

Leigh had an extraordinary final year. Once a CAT scan had revealed (in July 2008) that his brain had a large tumour, Leigh's response was to devote as much of his remaining time as possible to creative work. With devoted help from his wife, family and friends, he embarked on a great burst of writing, despite being battered by a major brain operation, followed by radiotherapy and chemotherapy. The effects were so severe that he temporarily lost the power of language altogether, but it gradually returned, and the very struggle to regain it became a central theme of his poems for *Stunning Debut*. He also completed *Nameless* as a further development of *Anarchy*. Both projects drew upon various aspects of his life and interests but were never simply autobiographical. In his words:

I want to reflect what I live with, to extract representation's  
subtle body in even the most intimate moments....  
We are so used to text being straightforward but I am so used  
to seeing this as profoundly bent, a much greater gap  
between what is obvious and what is mysterious. A place you can love  
and in which you are welcome, and where you have never been before.

In case this sounds too solemn and earnest, I should note that *Nameless* also has strains of down-to-earth humour and quirkiness. In the middle of "Wedding," a highly musical and passionate evocation of love, sex, and marriage, we are reminded of everyday props such as soap and socks. The philosophical confessions of Saint Augustine are interrupted by the car-stealing confessions of George Wilder. And readers of the text who are feeling lost are supplied with detailed instructions "for airmen downed at sea" who may, with "patient practice," use "the motion of ocean birds and clouds" to steer their way to dry land.

In recent decades, post-modern art with its preference for irony and scepticism has either ignored or satirised former modernist ambitions such as the desire to see the world in ecstatic new ways. Yet it is possible to combine elements of both approaches – as we can learn from music by Russian composers such as Alfred Schnittke or American avant-gardists such as John Zorn. *Nameless* developed its own range of “daily life” - shop-window “sign writing,” kids on skateboards, “the twenty-something with black curls and Sicilian 5 o’clock shadow hitting the last step a fraction ahead of his trailing unzipped loose jacket,” and many other precise explosions of everydayness – combining them with a desire for sights and sounds to be “taken to a limit,” to “the edge of resemblance,” “conscripted by amazement” as though “they were poised over some mystery.”

One welcome sign of broader recognition arrived soon after Leigh’s death with the announcement that his manuscript *Stunning Debut* had won the Kathleen Grattan Poetry Competition and would be published by Otago University Press.