Halliday's last O'Shea

31 Aug 2009 by Campbell Mattinson

***2 Sep** - Wine Communicators of Australia have just announced that Campbell Mattinson has been awarded the WCA Fellowship grant for 2009. The Fellowship grant will assist in funding research for a book project with the working title of* The Grape Escape*.*

The following report of how an historic bottle of Australian red, made by the celebrated Hunter Valley winemaker Maurice O'Shea, is volunteered by his biographer, Campbell Mattinson. The Wine Hunter; The Man Who Changed Australian Wine *is one of the most evocative wine books I have read. I can also recommend Campbell's website The Wine Front. where this was published earlier today.*

An old bottle courtesy of James Halliday. His last bottle of an O'Shea red and even if it weren't, the generosity of the gesture was as enormous as a hand to a falling man. Halliday carried the bottle, keeping it upright, on a small plane from Melbourne to Mildura, en route to Stefano's Restaurant beneath the Grand Hotel. It's an underground sitting room and in the private dining room it feels as though you're sitting in a cellar. It's not ornate. It could be 1944 in there. Italians arguing over citrus and water and wine. But it's not, it's 65 years later.

Chef Stefano De Pieri took a whole piglet and slow roasted it for a few hours. When he served it he said, 'I cooked it for 15 minutes too long'. A perfectionist's sad refrain. But I put a fork to the pork and it melted away. Halliday went back for thirds. 'I've just come back from Spain', he said, and boy does this stack up. I don't doubt him. It was also the perfect match to the wine. Halliday's last O'Shea.

A local Mildura reporter, tipped off that something special was going down, came in and asked: What would that bottle be worth?

Halliday looks at me, as if I'm the O'Shea expert. I'm not. I just adore Maurice, is all. He was my best mate for a year through 2005 and 2006 as I wrote about him, and truth is that I miss the bugger. Terribly,sometimes.

Well, I say to the reporter. A 1954 sold for about AU$3,000 at auction a few weeks ago, including commission. I know of this price because, the day after the auction, I received the following rather extraordinary email from a London-based collector:

'I spotted a bottle of McWilliam's Mt Pleasant Robert Hermitage 1954 in the Langton's Melbourne auction that closed today (lot 1771) . The estimate on the '54 seemed low to me ($450 - $550), so I left a bid of $950, then upped it to $1,250 to be sure. I got so emotionally involved in the book that after I sent my email to you last night and went to bed, I upped that bid to $2,550. I woke up this morning to see that it sold for $2,778, and sadly not to me. My communion with O'Shea will have to wait for another chance. I know that wait might not be a short one.'

So, I follow-up to the reporter, Maybe this 1944 Mount Henry might be worth $3,000 to $4,000?

I look at Halliday. I've not convinced him. But, he says emphatically, the '44 was always a much greater wine. Much greater.

Six of us were at the table. Australian wine writer Peter Forrestal is there too. 1944, by fluke, is his birth year. Halliday lines up the glasses and pours the contents of the bottle in a single pour, across all six glasses - individual pours would cause the bottle to tip up and down, and stir the sediment. This is a 65-year old wine you know. Some of the bones have shaken loose. Careful, careful.

And it's Halliday's Last O'Shea.

Mount Henry Light Dry Red 1944. A wine made during the second world war on a remote, hot, humid hill just after (I think, I haven't checked the exact dates) O'Shea's marriage crumbled. An emotional time in a tragic era. Bottled in a flat-bottomed bottle - no punt. No alcohol reading is given on the bottle.The address is listed as Newcastle - where Mount

Pleasant had offices at the time. Though the wine, of course, is 100 percent pure Hunter Valley.

And in its dotage, regardless of everything that is different in the world between then and now, the wine is more kaleidoscopically beautiful now that it was, likely, when it was young and O'Shea himself was still doing what he did, on that hillside out there.

And it brings us joy.

As a wine it is not simply 'alive', or 'drinkable', and therefore magical by default. You can't belittle a wine like this.

In April 1996 James Halliday opened one of his other bottles of this same wine. He wrote of it:

'Full brick-red; an amazingly fragrant bouquet, with layer upon layer of aromas which unfolded, to reveal cedar, cigar box, dark cherry and a trace of regional earth and tar. Literally flooded the mouth with its voluptuous sweetness, silky, long and lingering, with that sweetness carrying right through the mid to back palate. The quintessence of all that is great in the Hunter Valley. Once again, there has to have been some Pinot in this wine.'

The late David Wynn - the modern founder of Wynns Coonawarra Estate - once said of Maurice O'Shea: 'His Mount Pleasant wines were acknowledged as the best in Australia. Not only were his wines outstandingly good, but at that stage (the 1930s) Mount Pleasant was the only top quality wine in Australia. He established the standards for the Australian wine industry.'

The late Len Evans (who went to his grave having safely consumed his last bottles of O'Shea) hardly disagreed. 'Let me put it this way,' Evans said shortly before he died, 'I've had more enjoyment out of the old O'Shea wines than I have had out of old Grange - and I don't mean anything against Grange. The O'Shea wines simply give me more drinking pleasure.'

Halliday said that O'Shea was 'clearly a genius'. Hunter Valley legend, the late Max Lake, noted the primitive conditions O'Shea worked under (there was no electricity in the Hunter Valley for the entirety of his winemaking life), and said, 'He did things in impossible conditions and none of it has since been surpassed.'

Last Wednesday night I lifted an old glass of an O'Shea red to my mouth. It had no right to be good - this is the voice of a different generation, when things were different. But as the glass came near to me a shiver went down my spine. Several in fact. I may never know this moment again.

The wine was sweet and perfumed and aflame with life. It smelled of old knickers and wood palings, earth and sordid sheets. It smelled of sweet summer berries. It smelled of old musk lipstick and of a well-oiled cricket bat and of all manner of the useless things that we treasure. Blast it, it smelled short on regret and high on life - now and then and forever.

Most of us will agree on one thing. A lot of the things said about wine are a complete wank. I often wonder why so many of us bother; why so many of us care. Surely there's something better we all could be doing with our lives?

But then, this. An old wine by an old champion, carefully tended and resurrected. One final moment beneath the lights, after all these years. A group of eager folks. Food spread on the table. The mundane is frankly not bearable without this 'extra' of life. Carried and rested and resisted through twenty-three thousand, seven hundred and twenty-five-odd days.

Before, simply, it's opened. And is beautiful, for all to see and savour.

And to drink.

It made me think that Australian wine is not just an affection, but a responsibility.

And I can safely say that last Wednesday night, James Halliday and Maurice O'Shea grabbed this responsibility and swung it wild and free and for all it was damn well worth.

See the comment from Charles Metcalfe about the article on our members' forum.