David Holbrook, 1923 - 2011
A personal tribute

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I first came across David Holbrook when my young A-Level teacher decided that the rest of the Summer Term after the exams could be given up to current poetry, and so read out and talked us through some of the poets from the latest thing, Alvarez’s ‘The New Poetry’. I remember him reading and talking about Larkin, R.S Thomas, Gunn and Hughes, but also (more surprisingly, looking back) Holbrook: ‘Fingers in the Door’, a characteristic poem from family life; ‘Living? Our Supervisors will do that for us!’, a striking poem evocative, amongst other things, of Leavis and Leavis’s Cambridge (not that I knew that then: he’s not named); and ‘Unholy Marriage’, a poem whose vivid power to shock (it’s about a motorcycle accident) meant that I found it ideal for use in the classroom later, with all abilities.

But that’s to jump ahead. In the doldrums after university, I flew off to New Zealand on an NZ government scheme: the idea of teaching made bearable by the prospect of far-off places, a guaranteed job for three years, and, best of all, no PGCE year. We were to be trained in a school in one term, on full salary.

As a result, however, I was soon plunged into the maelstrom of a full-time teaching post, not quite knowing what I was up to.

I had always assumed that one job my degree would prepare me for would be English teaching, but now that I was doing it, I struggled to make connections. Reading English had been a wonder; sometimes a chore and frustrating, but more often exhilarating, a constant discovery of more and more riches. How did it relate to exercises to broaden vocabulary, or spelling tests?

And then, in a bookshop in Wellington, I came upon a smart blue CUP paperback called English for Maturity, by David Holbrook, which I snapped
up, and devoured: he made the connection for me. For one thing, he was recognisably the same person as the poet: here was no academic text of theory or pretension, but a book, exemplifying its argument in its own vigorous supple prose, and determined to have its ‘feet on the ground’. I imagine no-one who has read and absorbed this book has ever forgotten its opening: the Introduction starts with a vivid account of Holbrook’s visit to a new school, a ‘secondary modern’, whose ‘architecture was an achievement of the spirit’; when Holbrook is seated in the Head’s study, the latter says, ‘Of course we only get the duds here’. Its first chapter is ‘Letters from a Fresh Young Teacher’.

The general emphasis is given in the title of Holbrook’s second chapter: ‘Aims: for Living or Earning a Living?’ Literacy, the general competence that will get one through life, is seen as central of course, but Holbrook’s key argument is dual: that imagination is essential in life in all sorts of practical ways and needs to be cultivated, and that imaginative literature provides a means of exploring and celebrating possible ways of living and so is ‘a primary activity of civilised man’. The central place given to poetry as ‘the very culture of the feelings’ I found inspiring. The chapter on ‘Reading’ dismissed comprehension exercises as often arid and introduced me to the idea that all pupils needed the experience of the best literature, and made it practical with Twain’s _Huck Finn_ as an example. For years I used it, mostly in extracts, at first working from my single Penguin copy, reading it out. It raises complex moral questions, confronts you with them, in simply direct, dramatic ways. But above all, Holbrook showed me how to get rid of the language/literature dichotomy: literature was the centre, and writing flowed out of and fed into literary study, and here was the English teacher’s proper sphere (the seed of the later ‘language across the curriculum’ movement is in _English for Maturity_, though its origin is further back). All this was elaborated and richly documented in the other Holbrook books I soon got hold of, such as _Children’s Writing The Exploring Word_, and ‘Averil Writes Literature’ in _The Secret Places_.

And then there was _English for the Rejected_. _English for Maturity_ and _English for the Rejected_ are affirmations: they affirm and verify the claim of Charles Ives, used as an epigraph in both books, that ‘In every human soul there is a ray of celestial beauty (Plotinus admits that), and a spark of genius (nobody admits that)...’ _English for the Rejected_ is a generous, beautiful book (though it is about damaged lives as much as anything). Its substance is a 140-page central section called ‘Sparks from a Different Element’, which contains transcriptions of children’s poems and stories (all from Holbrook’s lessons), reproductions of some of the original handwritten versions, and
of the paintings and drawings the pupils also produced, together with Holbrook’s painstaking and meticulous commentaries.

When I arrived in New Zealand, in May 1970, David Holbrook arrived in Australia, though I did not know it until much later. *English in Australia Now* came out in 1973, to my excitement, because surely this was a book for me too, just across the water? The review in *The Use of English*, I remember, was headed, mischievously, ‘Maturity for Australians?’ It was, I think, the best of his later educational books, a little marred by an embattled feel and an undisguised dislike of Melbourne and things Australian, but there are sensitive and generous accounts of lessons and children’s writing, and a nice touch is that the text has some of his drawings to provide illustrations of some of the places mentioned. Near the start is a careful description of a drama lesson, a tribute to a gifted young teacher, and in itself an account of how to teach an arts subject, and how to establish good working relations with youngsters, the two things being shown to be inseparable:

> As they walked back to the school their gait had a certain spring in it ...They were better able to enjoy themselves: the most significant aspect of such a lesson is the implicit high value it set on one’s whole bodily and imaginative existence.

In his account of the drama lesson and the intuitive processes it draws on in teacher and taught, Holbrook recognises important and easily ignored truths, about what is valuable, about real achievement. Later in the book, after commenting on the insights embodied in some children’s writing, he says:

> Moreover, since, as Polanyi says, ‘we can know more than we can tell’, it is also possible, as James Britton has said, for a child ‘to write better than he knows’. Children are capable of expressing the most profound truths ...  

Once I returned to England in 1975 to teach in the Midlands and later in Suffolk, Holbrook, I discovered, was felt to be distinctly passé. People liked to point out that he had never taught in a school full-time. Yet what he did do, from the amount of exposure to secondary education he did have, was passionate and far-reaching. In just about all the schools I taught in, in New Zealand and England, I came across, and gratefully used, ‘textbooks’ he had produced: for example, a workbook in several volumes called *I’ve Got to Use Words* (with poems, stories, tasks, simple
attractive drawings); an excellent short story collection, *People and Diamonds*; and a series of rich poetry anthologies called *Iron Honey Gold*; there were more.

In the last third of my teaching career I was aware of David Holbrook more as a poet I enjoyed and could draw on: apart from ‘Unholy Marriage’, I enjoyed doing ‘Beggar Beads’, and ‘Going to a Wedding after Gathering Watercress’, mainly with Year 12s. I more than once thought of contacting him to ask if he would remove the last line of ‘A Week Spent Teaching Poetry’, a marvellous poem otherwise. How many people could write so honestly? It is a poem of humour and warmth, and a great account of the actual feel of teaching.

Arguably Holbrook’s finest achievement, his novel, *Fleshwounds*, appeared in Michael Marland’s excellent Longman’s Imprint series aimed at upper secondary pupils. Its main character, based on the author at an impressionable age, not long out of his late teens, undergoes rigorous hellish army training, that changes him and destroys a relationship, and then takes part in the even more hellish Normandy landings. The scene where Paul Grimmer mistakes the whistle of the departing train for a scream from the girl he is parting from is unforgettable. The overwhelming horror and destruction (set against the backdrop of the beautifully evoked French summer countryside) leaves one in no doubt that the experience left Holbrook with something he had to grapple with for the rest of his life (it strikes me now that there is a symbolic power in the crash in ‘Unholy Marriage’, that destroys young bodies so terribly), but what is heartening is that he responds with the creative and positive urgency that shines through all his best work.