

MARTIN SHARP

As told to Lowell Tarling

SHARPER Bringing It All Back Home
Part Two: 1980-2013 As told to Lowell Tarling
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When asked to review Volume 2 of Lowell Tarling's Martin Sharp biography, I recalled Roger Foley-Fogg's review of Volume 1, entitled *SHARP, Road to Abraxis, Part One: 1942-1979* in *OZ Arts* Vol. 10, Summer 2017, and I thought I should start by reading both volumes.

When I was an architecture and art student who emerged into the lefty cosmos around 1966, Martin Sharp was already a cultural hero, along with the other *OZ Magazine* conspirators. Vietnam was on, and until Charles Manson showed up, the left leaning, the perverse and the drug addled mostly imagined we were all on the same side.

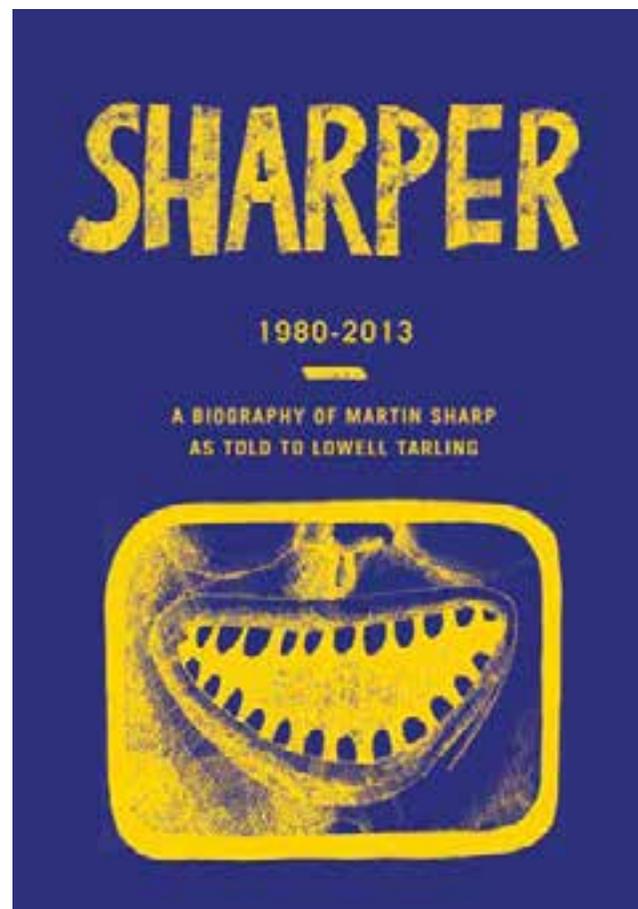
For an active undergraduate university student, the present was how to make space for oneself in the world, and to be as irritating as possible to the preceding generation. Martin was an excellent example to follow.

Martin came from a liberal patrician family. While resenting, and dwelling on, the bullying he received at Cranbrook School, a goodly proportion of his lifelong friends had been students or teachers at Cranbrook. If it wasn't for the coincidence of Hogwarts being next door to his home, Wirian, one could posit a case of Stockholm syndrome. As it was, the periodic re-financing of his lifestyle and projects came from intermittently selling off bits of Wirian to Cranbrook.

Some things never change. For those who have not benefited from being educated in a private boys' school, try reading 'Tom Brown's School Days'. Comparison of Rugby school with Cranbrook is particularly apt, as, like a curate's egg, each was good in parts.

In Cranbrook, Martin studied under Justin O'Brien and maintained a connection with others from their art department for the rest of his life. I suppose it was also easy; they were just over his back fence. If you want deliberate evil, go to Dickens or William Golding.

Sharp, 1941-1979 describes Martin Sharp in growth; entering the world stage as an artist, and returning to Australia to work on desirable projects like the Yellow House and the rejuvenation of Luna Park. It ends with the lethal Ghost Train fire which was particularly traumatic for Martin.





Sharper, 1980-2013, the subject of this review, is a comprehensive account of the later life of a graphic artist who had been so highly visible to the population in his early years that he remained a cultural force, a player; someone 'everybody knew', for the remainder of his life.

Despite enviable project productivity, the second half of Martin's life seems to describe a kind of retreat on his part. He preferred to operate from his large house in Bellevue Hill, Wirian, periodically filled with friends, boarders, informal employees, and hangers on. The latter included the dispossessed, mad, fugitives, and, I expect, some deluded sycophants.

His chaotic output seems to have become fragmented into too many areas. Much of his effort became a fight for funding of projects and the consequent run-down of his family inheritance. This becomes Sharp as superannuated counter cultural hero, obsessing on the tragedy of the Ghost Train. His main project financially seems to have been Tiny Tim, to whom he was both patron and Boswell.

Clearly, Martin's obsessions, as revealed in this book, developed during his youth, when they were indistinguishable from the self-centred ramblings of our generation that most of us grew out of, or one might say, out of which most of us grew.

The issues that Martin adopted, and which stayed with him for the rest of his life included:

- Tiny Tim: The support for Tiny Tim, and the documentation of his genius in words, music and on film, beyond Tiny's death in 1996;
- Luna Park: The future of Sydney's Luna Park, before and after the Ghost Train fire at Luna Park in 1979;
- The Yellow House live-in art project in Potts Point, Sydney (1970-72) and its legacy;
- The legacy of OZ Magazine and other 1960s projects;
- Vincent Van Gogh;
- The Eternity man, Sydney's Arthur Stace;
- The preservation of Wirian as a centre of operations.

Top:
Martin Sharp photographed at Luna Park
by Peter Adams

Left:
Martin Sharp and Lowell Tarling,, 1984
photo Peter Jensen

Opposite page:
Martin Sharp, photo Jon Lewis

Is it a reliable account?

Both volumes are drawn from taped interviews with Martin Sharp and other named literary and personal sources. Lowell Tarling has taken various accounts of periods in Martin's life and major projects. He names the protagonists in each period and how they fit into the Sharpocentric universe. He is kind to Martin on those character traits that those outside his circle might see as flaws, but issues them anyway. I learned things I didn't know, about people I did know, with confidence in the source.

Repetition

While reading the first volume, I was conflicted. The admirable scholarship of careful ascription in assigning who said what to whom; literary or verbal sources, frequently gave way to almost word for word restatement. Often a proposition was made, then appeared to be quoted and ascribed two or three times in close proximity, then again in other parts of the text. This occurred less frequently in the second volume. The author acknowledges the assistance of Roger Foley and Tim Lewis in preparation of the final draft of Sharper.

I had found this mildly irritating and sought a positive spin. I asked my youngest child, a graphic designer in her late thirties, if she knew who Martin Sharp was, what OZ magazine was, what was the Yellow House; and, well, she didn't.

So I sort of accepted restatement as a mechanism to keep a running narrative going for anybody who had not been part of the sixties and seventies lunatic fringe, given the number of protagonists, each with some explanation of their relevance. Truncating the script was not a viable option and I don't think I could have handled it any better.

Unlike Sharp, there are illustrations in Sharper, which relate to both volumes.

Am I glad I read this book?

Yes, I am. It has made me think about the value of invulnerable heroes to society. Martin's patrician status gave him the kind of moral and financial invulnerability that mortals don't have, to pursue his projects. The great cathedrals would never have been built without crazed fixation, and we would be the poorer. Even Martin's beloved Vincent Van Gogh had the invulnerability of a small income and no children.

In this book, I recognised the man who procured my first acid trip, the writer of an architecture review I was in, a fellow student and a nude model at John Olsen's Bakery Art School, and an old friend, Pip, who has apparently been in the ground these last seven years.

Am I like John and Michael in Peter Pan? As I grew up, I slowly forgot how to fly.

James Elwing

James Elwing has a background in fine arts, training in the late 1960s at the National Art School Sydney, and the Bakery Art School under John Olsen. Between 1979 and 1981 he studied museum conservation and book restoration and worked as an institutional conservator from 1981 to 2012. With his wife Jill Gurney, Elwing & Gurney Archival specialises in the conservation and repair of books and documents as well as design binding.

