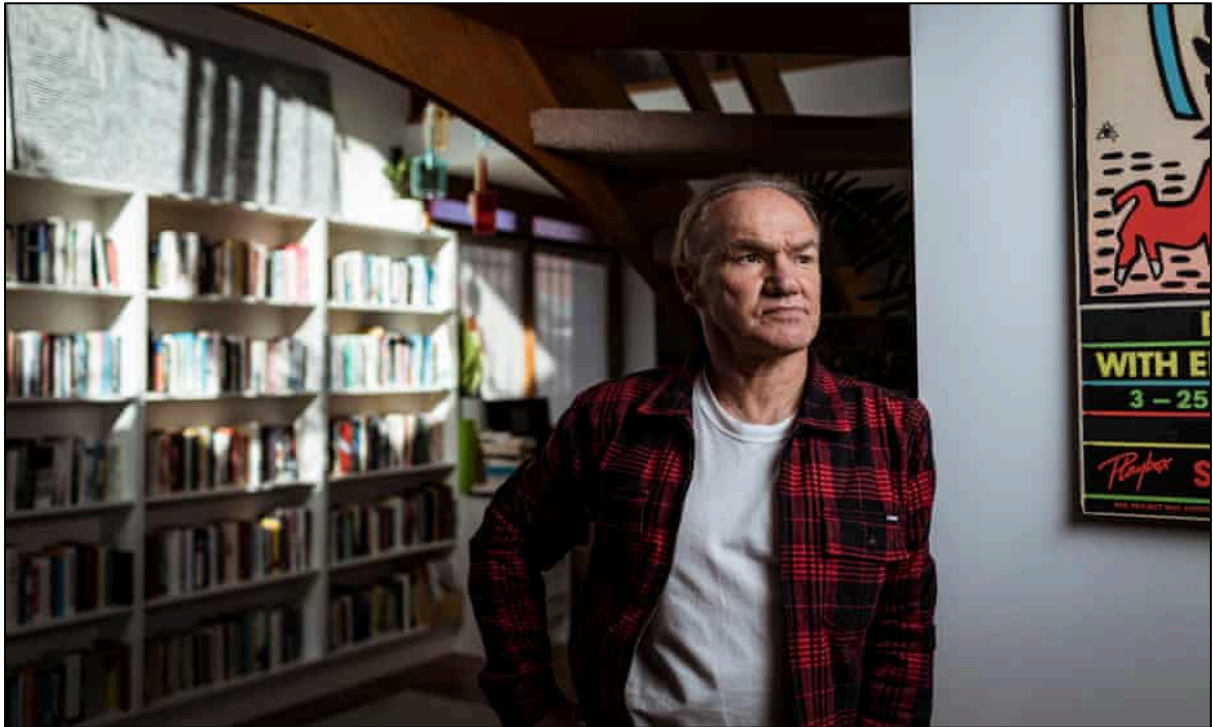


Tony Birch: my dad's ashes, the 86 tram and simple acts of reciprocity

In this extract from the upcoming Griffith Review, the academic and author takes the reader on his last journey with his father on a Melbourne tram



Author Tony Birch: 'I took my father's urn out of the shopping bag and placed it on the table, where he had a good view of the street.'

Tony Birch
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I collect my father on a hot Friday morning from a funeral home in Preston. He's waiting for me in a shopping bag, housed in a polystyrene crematorium urn – a temporary arrangement until a meeting can be held with my sisters, one older and one younger. Together, we will decide the ultimate fate of his ashes, as our father left no instructions. My personal wish is to scatter his remains in the Birrarung (Yarra) River, above Dights Falls. I want to watch the ashes slip beneath the white-capped rapids below the falls. It would be a poetic end for a man with little time for poetry. My sisters are yet to express their own wishes, except they are in agreement that although our father spent much of his life on the streets of Aboriginal Fitzroy, he no longer has a place among the ageing renovators of past decades or today's bearded hipsters furiously recolonising the colony.

I decided to take my father home on the 86 Tram. The route traverses the northern suburbs of Melbourne, dissects Fitzroy and Collingwood along Smith Street, and travels onward to the city centre. The 86 has a reputation for producing anarchic theatre. The poor and the not-so-poor mix on the tram, leaving the genuinely well off to the comfort of their air-conditioned SUVs, a seeming necessity negotiating the narrow streets of the inner city. While on the tram one morning with my granddaughter, Isabel, we were greeted by a woman caressing a two-metre snake. She insisted on explaining to Isabel and me, without prompting, “none of this is fucking illegal”.

Before catching the tram with my father, we went into a cafe in Preston for morning tea. I had coffee and cake – a cream-filled lamington, my dad’s favourite. Enjoying the relative quiet of the cafe, I took my father’s urn out of the shopping bag and placed it on the table, where he had a good view of the street. I felt uncharacteristically peaceful socialising with him without the fear of an argument or being prodded by triggering memories of his habit of explosive violence, which would have shattered the truce between us. During that cafe moment our relationship was equitable to a degree that had not been possible when he was alive. I felt completely at ease with my dad, and he didn’t seem to mind. The waitress came over with the bill and politely asked me, as I expect she asked all customers, “Do you have much planned for the rest of the day?”

“Well,” I offered, “I’m taking my father home with me on the tram.”

She turned and searched the empty cafe. “Where is he?” she asked.

I tapped on the side of the urn. “In here.”

Finding a seat on the tram that morning was easy. Since the days – and now years – of Covid, those able to have mostly avoided public transport. I loved the community of the 86. While we remained physically distanced, we connected socially, with conversation exchanged throughout the tram. Two stops after Dad and I had sat down an ageing Uncle got on. I said hello; he smiled and nodded, sat and commenced rolling a cigarette. It was a meticulous exercise, requiring all his concentration. He finished rolling one cigarette and immediately began another. He then put the cigarettes in a coat pocket and loudly announced to his fellow commuters, “I’m not smoking them. I’m what’s called a preparation man. Just like the Boy Scouts,” he added, winking at me.

A team of ticket inspectors got on the tram near the end of High Street.

For reasons unknown, they tend to travel in a mob of five, a handy number if they’re thinking of starting their own social basketball team. They moved

through the tram, glued together, requesting our “validated” swipe cards. When the instruction was put to the Uncle he feigned deafness and looked out of the window. “Your travel card. Please,” one of the team shouted at him. Over the next few minutes the Uncle dug into every pocket, both real and imaginary, searching for his card. His was a performance of great trickery. “I’m sure it’s here some place,” he mused and began the search again. Eventually, he gave up and said, “I must have dropped it.”

“Dropped it? Where?” The five inspectors, now surrounding the Uncle, looked down at the ground.

I carry two travel cards, my own and a spare for occasions when I catch a tram with one of my grandkids. I discreetly took the spare card out of my wallet, dropped it at my feet, leaned forward and announced, “Are you looking for this one, Uncle?” The team turned and stared at the card. The Uncle’s eyes lit up. “There it is,” he said, just as surprised as the inspectors were. I picked the card up and handed it to him. “There you go Uncle.” He waved it in the face of the team. “My right to travel. Here it is.”

Not entirely satisfied regarding the ownership of the card, one of the inspectors sat next to me. “You sure it’s not your card that you just handed to the old *boy*?”

I knew the game he was playing. He wanted to catch me out lying. All he needed to do to check the details of the card was to swipe it on the machine he carried, providing him with a detailed travel history that any private detective would envy.

I didn’t hesitate with my response. “It’s not my card. I found it on the floor. It belongs to Uncle.”

The inspector frowned at me. “He’s your Uncle?”

“He’s all our Uncle.”

With a pained look to his face, the inspector looked across the seat at the urn. “What do you have in there?” he asked, suspecting contraband.

“My father’s ashes. He loved the 86.”

The inspector jumped up and walked quickly to the other end of the tram. Giving up on the interrogation, the team left the tram at the next stop, considerably lightening the tension in the carriage. The Uncle offered to return the card to me. “Thank you, son. You were quick on your feet back there.”

“Please keep it,” I said. “I think there’s \$10 left on it. You’ll get a few more trips out of it.”

“Well, thank you. I’m obliged.” He took the two rolled cigarettes out of his coat pocket and offered them to me. “Here. Have a smoke on me.”

“It’s fine, Uncle. Really. I don’t smoke. Not for years anyway.” I picked up the urn and shook it. My dad rattled around inside. “My father smoked two packets a day all his life. They killed him.”

He bowed gracefully towards the urn. “I’m sorry for your loss, son, but you must take the cigarettes.”

“Sorry, but I can’t use them.”

My refusal clearly disappointed him.

“It doesn’t matter that you don’t smoke. I can’t take something for nothing. It’s not the way it works. It would be wrong for me to be in another man’s debt. Dependency, well, it’s a weakness. Puts me at a disadvantage. I need to pay you for what you did for me. It’s the only way we can be on honest terms with each other. And these smokes are all I have. Do you see what I mean?”

The pair of ill-shaped rollies rested between his nicotine-stained fingers.

“Go on,” he insisted. “You can take them for your mate.”

“My mate?”

“Yeah. Pass them on to your mate.”

His persistence had worn me down. “Thank you Uncle,” I said, and put the cigarettes in my pocket.

He smiled, said goodbye to us and got off at the next stop. The lights turned red at the pedestrian crossing outside the supermarket and I watched as he waddled across to the opposite street corner, where a community of Blakfullas meet regularly to talk and sing and sometimes share a drink. They have staked the last land claim on Fitzroy. Several years ago a petition was organised by local business owners along the street in an attempt to ban public drinking. It was a move clearly designed to sweep the streets clean of Aboriginal people. Fortunately, their scheming failed. During these days of “living with Covid”, the same businesses have commandeered the footpaths and street corners. Outdoor dining, with more than enough drinking, is now regarded as a necessary public health measure.

I got off the tram a few stops after the Uncle, on Gertrude Street, where my father had lived as a child – the same street that I, and my brothers and sisters, had known as kids. With my father's ashes safely secured in the shopping bag, I stopped and stood outside one of the street's few remaining pubs. It had been known as the Rob Roy for decades, and I sold papers in the front bar in the 1960s. It was a tough pub. In recent years the Rob Roy has been refurbished and renamed The Workers Club. The title is possibly a memorial to the ghosts of factory workers, street sweepers and villains of the past, although I cannot be certain. I looked up at the rebranded building and was reminded of the small plaques that adorn the facades of businesses and homes across the inner city. More recent arrivals have declared themselves "proud to acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung People as the Traditional Custodians of these Lands and Waters".

These signs of recognition can be purchased for \$44, which may not seem like a substantial financial outlay for illegally occupying Aboriginal land. But at least it is something more than symbolism. It sure beats acts of hollow rhetoric. And words. More words. And words. In contrast the \$44 is, well, \$40 plus another \$4 to seal the deal. Take it or leave it.

Leaving the pub and walking down Brunswick Street, I passed the House of Welcome, where Fitzroy's poor have been fed and cared for over many decades. When I was a child, I would line up outside the building each Saturday morning along with dozens of other local kids to enjoy the fleeting luxury of a hot bath. We would each be sent home with a shopping bag containing fresh bread and vegetables. In return all that was required of us was to chorus a prayer or two following bath time. A simple act of reciprocity. A hymn in exchange for a full stomach.

I was stopped on the next corner by a man who looked a little younger than me. He was seated in the doorway of a whitewashed shopfront. A baseball cap sat between his bare feet. It held only a few coins. He looked up and said, "Excuse me, mate. Do you have a smoke on you?"

As I don't smoke, I was about to disappoint him. And then I remembered the Uncle's cigarettes. "I do. They're only rollies," I explained, "but I have two of them."

I took the cigarettes out of my pocket and handed them to him. They were badly out of shape and I thought they must look pathetic, even to a desperate smoker.

"Beauty," he said. "Roll-your-owns are the best." He nursed the cigarettes in the palm of his hand and squinted at me. "I can't take them both. Would never take a last smoke." He lifted his hand. "Here. You take one and I'll keep one."

“It’s OK,” I said. “I don’t smoke.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he answered. “I can’t allow this.”

Thanking him, I said goodbye, returned the cigarette to my pocket and walked home with my father. In the kitchen, I took the urn out of the plastic bag, placed my father’s ashes on the table and retrieved a box of matches from under the sink. I went into the garden and sat the urn next to a potted fern. It was a good location for my father, if only a short-term arrangement. Taking the beaten and battered rollie out of my pocket, I held it in one hand and the box of matches in the other.