

## How to write an obit while in dire need of cakes and ale

Jeremy Gordin writes on the passing of a great American satirist

Jeremy Gordin

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“Dost think that because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” asks Sir Toby Belch in William Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* – written some 420 years ago.

We could update that rhetorical question for our world today, could we not?

Do you think that because you’re Woke and the world around us is falling apart – in some cases literally (check out Johannesburg’s Charlotte Maxeke Academic [*sic*] Hospital and our electricity infrastructure) – do you think there’ll be no more morning coffee and toast with honey?

Well, maybe there won’t be. Marmite, for example, has disappeared locally. When I was a student in Israel in the early 1970s, a great deal of energy was expended by my confrères and me in finding ways to get Marmite sent to us in the Holy land from Seffrica. *En kyk hoe lyk ons nou.*

Still, there’s something wonderful about asking Sir Toby’s question, in various forms, something elevating (even if the escalator’s shut down), something good for the soul – even if you’re an atheist or whatever.

Talking of which, I think we should extoll, honour and laud those among us who have recently shuffled off their mortal coil yet during their lives valiantly kept the spirit of Sir Toby foremost. And let me add, for those who have accused me of not being sufficiently ecumenical in my approach, that when it comes to rib-tickling pearls of wisdom, they do not have to be based in *yiddishkeit*; when it comes to laughing (and, for that matter, love), *treyf* tastes just as good.

(1) Try this for size (bearing in mind that it was written in 1986):

“I’d been told South Africa looks like California, and it looks like California – the same tan-to-cancer beaches – the same Granola’d mountains’ majesty, the same subdeveloped bushveldt. Johannesburg looks like LA. Like LA, it was all built since 1900. Like LA, it’s ringed and vectored with expressways. And its best suburb, Hyde Park, looks like Beverly Hills. All the

people who live in Hyde Park are white, just like Beverly Hills. And all the people who work there – who cook, sweep and clean the swimming pools – are not white, just like Beverly Hills. The only difference is, the lady who does the laundry carries it on her head. // I was prepared for South Africa to be terrible. But I wasn't prepared for it to be normal.”

(2) Or try this (also pre-1987):

“But there is one menace to western civilization, one assault on the free world, one threat to everything we value which the President has yet to confront. I speak of the childproof bottle top. ... [No] US citizen with an IQ over 110 is sober after 6:00 in the evening. Yet we have allowed our country's most effective headache cures to be sealed like the tomb of Amenhotep IV. ... How can our elite confront Soviet hegemony, lower interest rates [etc.] ... when their skulls are throbbing to the tune of the soundtrack for *Zulu Dawn*? ...

“The forces of safety are afoot in the land. I, for one, believe it is a conspiracy – a conspiracy of Safety Nazis shouting ‘Sieg Health’ and seeking to trammel freedom, liberty, and large noisy parties. The Safety Nazis advocate gun control, vigorous exercise, and health foods. The result can only be a disarmed, exhausted, and half-starved population ready to acquiesce to dictatorship of some kind.”

(3) Or if you're interested in more *intemellectual* material:

“Recently I performed an intellectual experiment, I read one issue of the *New York Review of Books*, then watched one evening of prime-time network television. The comparison would, I hoped, give some clue to an ancient puzzle: Which is worse, smart or stupid? ... I began reading the *NYR* at 3:00 in the afternoon. The lead article was by Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale. It was a review of *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* by Paul Zweig, though that book was hardly mentioned. Mr Bloom took some five thousand words to say Walt Whitman is a very, very important poet who masturbated a lot.”

(4) Or perhaps some more directly political-economy material (2011):

“Political systems must love poverty – they produce so much of it. Poor people make easier targets for a demagogue. No Mao or even Jiang Zemin is likely to arise on the New York Stock Exchange floor. And politicians in democracies benefit from destitution, too. The US has had a broad range of poverty programmes for 30 years. Those programmes have failed. Millions of people are still poor. And those people vote for politicians who favour keeping the poverty programmes in place. There's a conspiracy theory in there somewhere.”

(5) Finally, something more recent (2021) [i]:

“Real economics are more complicated than anything that intellectuals can make sense of. Also, living in an ivory tower teaches few economic lessons – even fewer now that intellectuals have banned the ivory trade. Marxism puts inarticulate notions of a sharing-caring nicer world into vivid propaganda slogans. Slogans such as: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.’ Which may be the most ridiculous political-economic idea that anybody has ever had. My need is for Beluga caviar, a case of Chateau Haut-Brion 1961, a duplex on 5th

Avenue overlooking Central Park, a bespoke suit from Gieves & Hawkes in Savile Row, a matched pair of Purdey 12-bore sidelock shotguns, and a 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO that recently sold at Sotheby's Monterey auction for \$48.4 million. My ability is ... Um ... I have an excellent memory for limericks ... 'There once was a man from Nantucket' ...

“What kind of totalitarian mind-meld would be required to determine everyone's abilities and needs? What kind of dictatorship body slam would be necessary to distribute the goods of the able to the wants of the needy? We know what kind. The kind that the USSR and Mao's China did their best to create.”

Yes, you've guessed it [ii]. Today we wipe away a tear or two, say farewell, tallyho, and toodle-bum, while raising a glass of three (doesn't have to be Chateau Haut-Brion) in honour of PJ (Patrick Jake) O'Rourke, who died aged 74 on Tuesday – and who would and should be remembered, even if he'd written nothing else, for the article titled, “How to Drive Fast on Drugs While Getting Your Wing-Wang Squeezed and Not Spill Your Drink” [iii].

We celebrate O'Rourke, and devote an article to him, not only for being one of our era's foremost purveyors of the spirit of Sir Toby. We also revel in the memory of his work – or I certainly do – in the name of (what I have referred to above as) ecumenism.

I might be being over-sensitive (for I am deeply sensitive), but I have sensed in the obituaries that have appeared worldwide in the so-called mainstream media (MSM) a little holding back, some damning with faint praise.

Why this lack of effusiveness? No secret. O'Rourke – who was at one time *Rolling Stone's* foreign-affairs desk chief [iv] – made no bones about the fact that he (having been a hippie and leftie in his youth [v]) was a “a proud conservative Republican” and was also the HL Mencken Research Fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. And you know how the MSM feel about libertarians and Republicans.

But O'Rourke was too smart and too anti-sanctimonious to be a *doctrinaire anything*. In 2010, *The New York Times* invited him to define “Republican” and “Democrat”. He said: “The Democrats are the party that says government will make you smarter, taller, richer and remove the crab grass on your lawn. The Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work and then get elected and prove it.”

In 2016, O'Rourke said: “I am endorsing Hillary [Clinton], and all her lies and all her empty promises. It's the second-worst thing that can happen to this country, but she's way behind in second place. She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters.” It's also noteworthy that O'Rourke's final book (2021), of the more than 20 he wrote, was titled *A Cry From the Far Middle: Dispatches from a Divided Land*.

Thing about O'Rourke, if you read him with care, is that he simply wrote what he saw, and this was the key (or one of them) to his wit. O'Rourke described the presidency of Barack Obama as “the [Jimmy] Carter administration in better sweaters”.

O'Rourke first solo book, *Modern Manners: An Etiquette Book for Rude People* (1983, reissued in 1989) – a favourite, if I remember correctly, of my learned friend, Andrew Donaldson – was full of practical advice, including this for gentlemen: “A hat should be taken off when you greet a lady and left off for the rest of your life. Nothing looks more stupid than a hat.” I’m sure I could find a copy for our minister of police.

So, we say goodbye with love and effusiveness to a man who brought us a plenitude of cakes and ale – remembering that even if there are some Politicsweb readers who don’t care much for the Republicans [vi], it doesn’t really matter a damn.

*Hamba kahle*, PJ. I know nothing about the afterlife, but if it’s there and if you’re there, keep laughing – and writing too, if you can.

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## **Endnotes**

[i] This one sounds as though David Bullard could have written it (which is a compliment); well, he could have. But, be warned, it wasn’t him.

[ii] (1) is from “In Whitest Africa,” *Holidays in Hell*, Picador, 1989. (2) is from the masterpiece, “Safety Nazis,” *Republican Party Reptile (RPR): Essays and Outrages*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987. (3) is from “An Intellectual Experiment,” *RPR*. (4) is from *Eat the Rich: A Treatise on Economics*, Pan Macmillan, 2011. (5) is from the chapter titled “Why Kids R Commies,” *A Cry From the Far Middle: Dispatches from a Divided Land*, Atlantic Books, 2021.

[iii] Though he also wrote a book called *Age and Guile Beat Youth, Innocence, and a Bad Haircut* (1995), which did not – at least for me – turn out to be as accurate as I’d hoped.

[iv] As was Hunter S Thompson, who would’ve rather eaten ground glass than have anything to do with Republicanism.

[v] “I couldn’t stay a Maoist forever,” he wrote. “I got too fat to wear bell-bottoms. And I realized that communism meant giving my golf clubs to a family in Zaire.”

[vi] Well, there *must* be about two of us.