

# This Life

Edited by  
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## Literary wit with the wavy brown hair

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Ray Mathew  
Writer  
1929-2002

He was slight, shortish, neatly dressed, tie and jacket (was it tweed?), carrying, as I remember it, a battered leather briefcase. Light brown wavy hair, a roundish face ready to break into laughter, and eyes that really did seem to smile.

It was 1951, Sydney University's Union Steps at Parramatta Road, and my friend from school, Robin Pratt, and I had just got off the bus, in plenty of time for our nine o'clock lectures.

"There's Ray," said Robin. Ray Mathew, a friend of her mother, the artist and writer Pixie O'Harris, was becoming a regular visitor, as I was, to the welcoming Pratt house in Vaucluse where there was always tea and talk. At 21, or so to our 17, he had an allure of cultural sophistication, so, of course, when he suggested a cup of coffee the three of us were soon in the dining room of the women's union's Manning House.

An hour and a half later Ray and I were still talking. Our Manning House group was fascinated by conversation as an art, although we wouldn't have thought to put it like that, and Ray, his quick light voice tossing off witticisms and pertinent comment, was very good at it.

The conversation finally ended for Ray this year in New York, although it had been fading for a year or so as he fought the cancer that killed him at 73.

Ray Mathew, poet, playwright, short story writer, novelist, critic, schoolteacher and adult education lecturer, was well known in the Sydney literary world of the 1950s. One of the midwives of the Australian cultural self-confidence that emerged in the '60s, he was never to return after leaving Australia for London at the end of the '50s with a British Arts Council grant and a production lined up for his play *The Life of the Party*, a finalist in the 1957 London *Observer* competition. From the mid-'60s, his home was to be in New York.

Ray published three books of verse, many short stories, monographs on Miles Franklin and Charles Blackman, and a novel.

He wrote radio plays, film scripts and contributed to the thoughtful Australian magazines and journals of the time, including *The Observer*, *Meanjin* and *Australian Letters*. But it is as a playwright that he is most remembered.

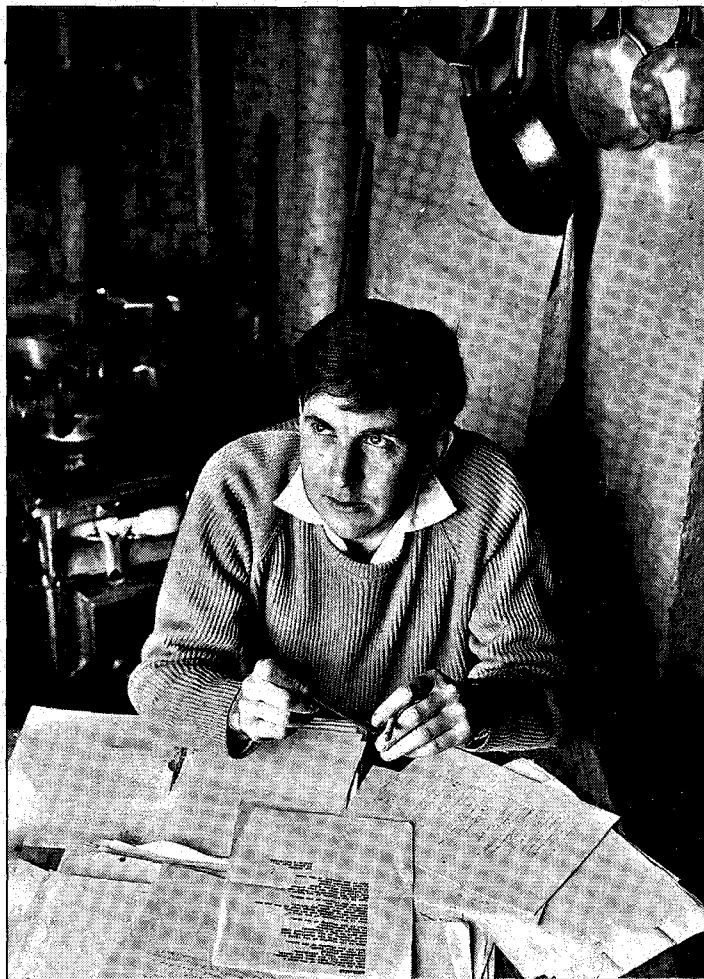
"He awaits the critical attention he deserves," Katharine Brisbane, the Australian theatre authority and founder of Currency Press, wrote in 1995, noting that in the 1950s his plays were ahead of the imagination of the time. "In retrospect, his was the most innovative mind ... His work also foreshadowed the more indigenous new forms that emerged in the 1960s." In particular, his *Sing for St Ned* anticipated such plays as Ron Blair's *Flash Jim Vaux* and *The Legend of King O'Malley* by Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis. It also reflected Ray's fascination with the theme of the randomness of life and death. "[Ned's father] was a bad lot - and Irish, you can imagine what that means. He might have been a farmer who planted and grew things or a penpusher who wrote things or a counterjumper who sold things but he happened to be a Kelly who took things. It wasn't a matter of choice."

Ray's best-known play, *A Spring Song*, has had productions in Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. Currency Press published it in 1985 and next year, in a second volume of *Plays of the 50s*, will give *The Life of the Party* its first publication. In Katharine

**He was one of those people you don't have to see often for them to be an enhancing part of life.**

Brisbane's view "it is the most difficult of Mathew's plays ... a bitter comedy based on his experience of bohemian life among the writers and artists of Sydney's Kings Cross". She thinks that even nearly 50 years after it was written a lot of the characters are immediately recognisable.

Ray was a child of parents battered by the Great Depression - his father lost his job, although as things improved he was to become a manager with Horlicks (lots of malted milk then on the Mathew menu). Ray was born in



Leichhardt, moved to Bondi, where he surfed, and went to Sydney Boys' High and Sydney Teachers' College before teaching for three years in NSW country schools at Tottenham, Derridong and Ironbark.

Ray was the first to admit that he didn't fulfil the expectations raised by his early prolific period. Although he kept on writing (he was working on a long novel at the time of his death), he had nothing much new published after 1967. He had been disappointed by his lack of success in London, had had treatment for alcoholism, and kept melancholic tendencies under control with a wide circle of friends - loneliness, being cut off from agreeable company, was an early theme in his work. Along with his

aid, he'd drop in with his latest mystery novel review to Sid Baker, the literary editor. Donald Horne, my husband-to-be, was a close friend of Doug and Ann McCallum and we were often among the academics and writers at the soirees? salon? - certainly more than parties - at their house at Cammeray. In the big sitting room with the bay window looking down over the lights of the hill to the upper reaches of Middle Harbour, the talk could go on all night. After one such occasion, to keep the conversation going, Ray took Donald and me back to his "flatette" in Millers Point for a breakfast of steak and Tabasco.

I more or less lost touch with him when he left Sydney. However, when Rod Shaw, artist, activist and half of the quality printing house Edwards and Shaw, asked me to read some verse at what proved to be an extraordinary occasion, I chose Ray's. The gathering in 1983, to mark the end of the printing house, was in Rod's studio in Sussex Street, just by Pyrmont Bridge, an intriguing basement space hewn out of rock to provide foundations for the building, and there, until almost dawn, dozens of Australian poets and their friends read and listened to the poetry put into books by Edwards and Shaw.

Soon after, I was back in touch with Ray. Donald and I would see him in New York in a few months. It was more than 20 years since we had last met. How would he have changed? In Washington I

Ray Mathew in the late '50s ... "a roundish face ready to break into laughter, and eyes that really did seem to smile".

had a sudden frisson, as a man, a bit like Ray, obviously retrenched and gone beyond his government social service unemployment benefit period, begged in the street.

He was taking us for lunch. We were to meet at the Carlyle on Madison Avenue. Tweed jacket, tie, greying brown wavy hair, smiling eyes. Immediately recognisable. We had our pre-lunch drinks in the bar with the famous Bemelmans murals. Surrounded by the creations of this whimsical observer of the world of children, Ray made a remark, at once funny, poignant and revealing: "What are we going to do when we grow up?"

In the mid-'60s Ray went to the United States with an introduction to Eva and Paul Kollsman, frequenters of New York film and art circles. Paul Kollsman was the inventor in 1928 of the world's first barometric altimeter, an invention that changed aviation, and founder of the New Hampshire Kollsman Inc, a company specialising in aviation, defence and medical instrumentation. What was to be a visit turned out to be permanent, and Ray lived, as friend and companion, in their art-filled apartment on Fifth Avenue until his death.

I met Eva with Ray for afternoon tea across the road from the Metropolitan Museum. A stylish European New Yorker, charming too, she was wearing, especially for the occasion, a knitted jacket from Olivia Newton John's shop in Los Angeles - "because she's Australian". And that's what Ray remained. After he'd spent more than half his life away, my occasional letters and telephone conversations, even over the last year, were still with the same Ray I had met all those years ago.

Eva and Gareth Jones, Welsh-born Manhattan antique dealer and close friend of 20 years to her and Ray, see his Australianness as part of his essence. On his last birthday in April, Ray bedridden and dying, they put on a party in his book-walled room with anything Australian they could find - a boomerang, stuffed koalas, various versions of *Waltzing Matilda*.

It could have been a scene from a Ray Mathew play.  
Myfanwy Gollan