



Remembering Steven Burns (1941-2024)

Road Trip

—Darren Bifford (Champlain College)

In the early spring of 2002, in the weeks following the conclusion of term and a few weeks before I began to write my MA thesis under his direction, I found myself driving with Steven to Toronto for the CPA. The plan, as I recall, was to sleep in Montreal and leave early the next day to arrive mid-afternoon at Toronto. We were to pick up Alice MacLachlan in Kingston, where she was an MA student at Queens. Steven, of course, could have flown, an altogether easier, less tiring— and, in those days, not outrageously unaffordable—option. The thought didn't strike me then, as it does now, that Steven's invitation to go on a road trip together was another instance of the under-stated naturalness of his generosity, especially his generosity towards me.

Steven somehow tolerated my driving habits. I drove too quickly, far too quickly as it turned out, especially given that it was Steven's new car that we drove. I recall him waking in the passenger seat and almost shuddering as he took notice of the speedometer, closing in at 150km. *I suggest*, he said, *that you consider slowing down*. I'm fond of this memory because it allows me to recall how Steven offered criticism in a way that seemed like a suggestion but turned out to be absolutely serious.

I continue to have little idea why he trusted me to find accommodations in Montreal. I said I had a friend from back in Victoria, and that she had said we could stay with her. This was not someone I knew particularly well, but I thought of her as a generous soul, so I trusted that she had a room in which we could all stay. I suppose Steven did, too. Steven bought a cheap bottle of red at a Dep, for a gesture of thanks to my friend, since all the provincial liquor stores were closed. We watched the Leafs playoff game at a sports bar, and when my friend finally showed up, she said for us to follow her in the car. I didn't

know my way around Montreal at the time, but Steven seemed to. So I noticed his eyes widen as we continued to turn and ascend further and further to the upper reaches of Westmount. This is not where the common folk live. We pulled into the carport of an incredibly stately mansion. When I turned off the engine, we sat a minute in the car, a bit stunned, and Steven, as if voicing a conclusion arrived at after a series of private deliberations, said “This, I think, will do”. He told me, however, to leave the wine in the car.

Naturally in such circumstances we all had our own room. When I woke in the morning I found Steven in the kitchen, drinking coffee served by the maid, graciously indulging my friend’s mother in a discussion of some popular spiritual theme which seemed to interest her. She said she was very pleased to have unexpectedly discovered a *philosopher* in her kitchen that morning.

When we arrived at U of T, I recall that we all found our way to the residences, where everyone was staying. As if to say *Now we shall part ways after quite a long trip together*, Steven asked whether I knew where I was staying for the duration of the conference. I told him, naively, that I did not know, but figured I’d get a room somewhere. Steven: “You *mean* you *haven’t* booked a room?” I understood immediately that I’d overlooked a crucial piece of planning. When it turned out, as he feared, that there were no available rooms, Steven said—with perhaps an audible hint of annoyance and resignation—that I could sleep on the floor of his room, if there were no alternatives. Of course, I accepted.

During the course of that road-trip, we listened to a good deal of music. We also discussed, if I recall, the outlines of my unwritten thesis. I think Steven had a deeply intuitive sense of the sort of particular instruction each of his students required. For me, a conversation on the road was exactly what I needed to find the courage with which to begin writing. On our return, we attempted to drive all the way from Toronto to Halifax, but we were forced to sleep at a roadside motel outside of Sackville because of exhaustion. I believe, once again, we found ourselves watching the Leafs on the tiny television screen between us.

Montreal, October 20, 2024.

For Steven Burns’ 80th Birthday
—Andrew Brook (Carleton University)

The period when Steve and I had the most to do with each other and the period in his life about which most people reading these remarks will probably know the least is his years of graduate study at the University of Alberta and then at Birkbeck College, University of London, in the UK in the mid- to late 1960s. So that’s the period on which I will focus. Steve came to the University of Alberta late in the summer of 1963 (over 60 years ago). At the time I was a senior undergraduate in Philosophy and Steve was beginning an MA. I was only two years behind him but at the time it felt more like two decades. He already had a degree (from Acadia) and he was tall, slim, good-looking, an excellent long-distance runner, musical, and travelled (he travelled the world on a Rotary Scholarship before coming to the U of A). I was exactly none of those things (well, maybe tall). He knew

philosophers such as Ortega y Gasset that I had never heard of. And so on. I was seriously in awe of him.

We ended up in apartments above and below each other, Steve sharing with David Murray, a recently-hired philosophy faculty member also from Nova Scotia. Steve and David's place became Hegel Central, the place where David taught us most of what we know about music, the planning centre for the local film series, and so much more—a lifelong influence on those of us lucky enough to be involved.

It was an excellent time at the U of A. Bas van Fraassen, who became a world-significant philosopher of science, was also an undergraduate, as was Beverly Geetz (as she was then), who as Beverly McLachlin became the longest-serving Chief Justice of Canada. Other notables included Wes Cragg, who ended up as Canada's most influential business ethicist, Joe Lambert, who became an internationally famous logician, and Terrence Penelhum, who went on to build an outstanding department at the then-brand-new University of Calgary. A number of other students of the time went on to solid academic careers.

A few quick stories from our time in England and then I will stop. Steve and I flew there together. I will never forget the morning we arrived. There we were, dazed from lack of sleep, walking down the Strand beside the Thames, in the center of London. We were in England! Soon I was off to Oxford and Steven to Birkbeck College.

One winter, David, who was working at Birbeck by then and also was a music critic for the *Financial Times*, managed to secure tickets to Wagner's *Ring Cycle* in Covent Gardens for us. Steve and I saw all four parts, 15 hours in total, in one week! We had nose-bleed seats, so far up that we were well above the top of the proscenium arch, which allowed us to follow the libretto with a flashlight. It was a transformative experience. By the end of the week, we were in a different world.

Steve loved spicy food, the hotter the better. In that period, he would have Indian food prepared so hot that as he ate, a red flush would break out at the base of his neck and slowly work its way up. In this as in so many other ways, I could not begin to keep up with him.

The late 1960s was a fascinating time to be in England: the Beatles, the Stones, Pink Floyd (who played at my college), Carnaby St., nuclear disarmament protests, Trudeau-the-elder idolized (not by all of us) on a trip to London, extremely loud and boisterous anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, massive student protests in France and Germany, a conference of Canadian Socialist Students (alas, the only one), and so on.

I was and am grateful that I got to share some of that time with Steve. We remained friends from then on, not as intensely as in that period—marriages, families, careers in different cities—but friends. We last spent significant time together a year ago. Despite his serious health problems, we walked for hours in the area around Dalhousie. Steve was always a fan of my work, for which I am also extremely grateful, and he reminded me over and over what a font of penetrating philosophical ideas he was – many of which he never published. I miss those conversations intensely.

October 25, 2024

—Sylvia Burrow (Cape Breton University)

I first met Steven when I was an undergrad at Dal doing my philosophy Honours degree. I unfortunately did not have a chance to take a course from Steven but I heard good things about him from the other students. He seemed like such a congenial, reasonable, and respectable professor. As the years went by and I later got to know him as a colleague. I was impressed with his calmness, kindness, and a keen sense of humour bubbling underneath.

I found him easy to talk to, and we would have conversations about music or poetry, or whatever quirky thing was happening that week. Steven impressed me as someone who was steeped in a background of culture informed by his deep understanding of humanity.

I can't imagine how many people Steven must've touched over the years, but I am sure he made a deeply favourable and lasting impression among those he talked to. I certainly have not met that many people who could parallel Steven's wit, kindness, calmness, and humanity.

October 15, 2024

Remembering Steven Burns...

—Richmond Campbell (Dalhousie University)

Steven has been my friend and colleague for fifty-five years. Besides our passion for philosophy, we shared an intense love of the lakes and woods in Kejimikujik National Park and in the large adjoining Tobeatic Wilderness Area. We would sometimes share canoe trips in these areas with others and enjoyed reminiscing about our experience. One time, twenty-eight years ago, we set out on a ten-day canoe trip into the Tobeatic with four women. They were experienced canoeists and campers and shared our passion for being out in nature. We were well-prepared, planning our route together, deciding on the equipment needed, and knowing how to use a map and compass effectively. The first four days were fun filled, singing, dancing, and laughing at ourselves. But midway on our adventure, after one of us had cut her feet on rocks and my small cooking stove had caught fire and became useless, we decided to think seriously about returning to home base in Kejimikujik Park rather trying to complete the trip as planned. Our discussion was intense and reached no conclusion that everyone could accept. We decided to rest for the next day, which was sunny rather than rainy, cold, and foggy, as it had been. We finally agreed to continue as originally planned. Steven played reveille at 6 am on his pipe whistle each morning so that we were fed, packed, and in our canoes by 8 am. We still had fun, but we were a more serious crew, moving through the trackless wilderness and foggy lakes and streams like a machine, arriving at home base on the tenth day, as planned. The trip was scary for me and Steven, even though we loved being in real wilderness without trails in the vicinity of black bears and with no way to communicate with rescuers if we ran into trouble. Cell phones weren't invented yet. Even so, this arduous canoe trip was my favourite. I never asked Steven whether it was also his favourite. I didn't want to put him in

an awkward position. On the day that he died, Janet’s sister asked Steven what his favourite canoe trip was. He answered that it was this trip. Learning that he felt this way means the world to me. I shall never forget that, nor what it has meant to have Steven as my friend and colleague. He inspired me to give a talk on October 18th to the Dalhousie philosophy colloquium in his memory on the subject of freedom of the will. I used the decision we all made together to continue on our canoe trip as a paradigmatic expression of collective freedom of the will.

October 19, 2024

—Warren Heiti (Vancouver Island University)

Steven Burns was wise, generous, patient, gracious. He was also gentle. Gentleness is not a conventional virtue, but a quiet, invisible one. Yet it requires great strength to be gentle, especially when there are countless incitements not to be. Like love, gentleness is more powerful than force. It is a salvific power. Steven’s gentleness was and continues to be a rare shelter from the sharp edges of the world. Pausing in that shelter, one finds oneself able to catch one’s breath, to think and feel in fresh and tender ways that are otherwise impossible. Steven was one of the most hospitable philosophers and human beings that I have ever known.

October 21, 2024

Giving us pause(s)

—Michael Hymers (Dalhousie University)

The week that Steven died, I was composing an e-mail message to him in my head—a message which, as events transpired, remained unsent. The previous Friday I had taken the bus across the bridge to Quebec City, from Amélie’s house in Lévis, to watch the first five laps of the Grand Prix Cycliste de Québec, an annual event on the men’s professional cycling tour. I wanted to send him the photo I had taken of the peloton about to crest the Côte de la Montagne, the oldest street in the city, and a steep one, too. Steven understood the attractions of cycling. One day in the summer of 2009, I coaxed him into riding the big hills of Purcell’s Cove Road with me. “Go easy on him,” Janet said to me as we were leaving. “I’m sure there’s no need,” I thought, recalling that Steven had ridden the *bigger* hills of the Cabot Trail some years before, but as I reached the summit of the first big hill, Steven was nowhere in view. (I noticed the nothingness of his absence, as Sartre would have it—a joke for Steven.) However, a few seconds later, he reappeared around the bend, pedalling comfortably in low gear and soon joined me in front of the Fleming Tower School, no worse for wear. (Later that summer I climbed the same hill with my colleague Greg, who also disappeared from view. I found *him* waiting for *me* in front of the Fleming Tower

School.) We both survived the remaining big hills and stopped to rest on the rocks at Herring Cove before heading back into the city.

It occurred to me later that this disappearance-reappearance was another form of the Burnsian pause—a thoughtful, if occasionally disconcerting, silence in the middle of a lecture or conversation, which would eventually end with an insightful remark or a challenging question. Such pauses had something in common with the music of one of his favourite composers, Richard Wagner: long intervals when nothing seems to happen, followed by bursts of intense beauty. Steven never quite won me over to the music of Wagner, but his passion for it was enough to persuade me to spend some hours, including a sunny Saturday afternoon or two, in a Halifax movie-theatre, watching the New York Metropolitan Opera’s production of the Ring Cycle, directed by Robert LePage.

Steven’s pauses were typically shorter than Wagner’s operas, but the results were often both pithy and whimsical. A student in his Marxist Theory class in 1984 once asked a question about the relation between Marxism and feminism. Steven leaned back against a table at the front of the room, his arms beside him, and gazed off into space. There followed a magnificent silence. By this point in the term, we were already accustomed to such events, so we waited patiently while the afternoon flowed on, until the pause concluded with Steven’s careful reply: “Sex without guilt! That’s what we want.”

Cycling was not Steven’s primary athletic interest, though he continued to ride his bike into his 80s. Running was a greater passion. He was also a softball player, a hockey player, and an avid hiker and canoeist. In 2010 he took up golf, advising me, during a bleak period in my life, that I might find it therapeutic to do so as well because “all the pockets in the bag—to put things in” were “very satisfying in an Eeyore sort of way.” (There is, again, as much pith to this remark as there is whimsy.) When Steven was slow to recover from a broken hip during the winter of 2024, his two complaints to me were that he could not travel to Vienna and that he could not play golf.

If Steven’s athleticism was impressive, his capacity to reflect on it philosophically was no less so. I don’t think he *wrote* anything on the philosophy of sport, but he dealt in print with a great many other things, from Canadian nationalism in Leonard Cohen’s raunchy, experimental novel, *Beautiful Losers*, to sexism in Hume’s account of the virtues, to Wittgenstein’s tantalizing remark about talking lions.

He approached these topics, in the spirit of Wittgenstein and Winch, wary of over-generalization. His 1970 doctoral dissertation, “Self-Deception,” urges on us from the start the thesis that “a single, proper, analysis of self-deception ... is not a legitimate object of our search” and directs us instead to an understanding that comes from “a detailed examination of cases,” a theme echoed in a different key in “Let us compare mythologies: Robert Pippin and the Canadian Western” (2016). In his 1985 paper “Doing Business with the Gods,” he argues with great subtlety that just such a case-wise understanding of piety is given in Plato’s *Euthyphro* and that commentaries to the contrary “have not taken Plato’s irony seriously enough.”

Steven treated this varied subject-matter with a prose-style worthy of emulation. Criticizing David Rubinstein for failing to see the great differences between Wittgenstein’s talk of language-games and the sociology of knowledge or Durkheim’s social facts, Steven remarks in a 1985 critical notice, “Rubinstein leaps these gaps with too much grace,” and

goes on to complain that he writes “in the manner which I associate with government reports.” There is no *hint* of government reports when Steven observes that “colour offers us a scarlet thread that leads us through Wittgenstein’s philosophical work” (“The World Hued...”(2011)) or that “an objective, essentialist account of human nature and a subjective, wilful and existential account” are “two stools into neither of which we want to step” (“Moral Sanity ...” (1987)). Taking inspiration from Italo Calvino, his 1989 essay “The Place of Art in a Reasonable Education” was written to be read aloud by two presenters: an ironic commentator and a determined but “benighted professor,” who attempts (with considerable success, despite the commentator’s doubts) to knit together reflections on personhood, aesthetic observation and political philosophy. Near the start of his 2016 reflections on Robert Pippin and the (nonexistent) Canadian Western, he issues the invitation: “Think of me as an empty page.” (There it is again: the Burnsian pause, made spatial.)

Many of his themes were rehearsed in his classes. In his Philosophy of Art class in 1983, Steven played us snippets of Wagner and invited us to guess which of the four Greek elements were meant to be evoked (“The Ride of the Valkyries” was an unfortunate give-away). In that same class he showed us that it was possible to give a visual argument, demonstrating that the Wittgenstein house in Vienna does not look like a prison and that in Tom Thomson’s *The West Wind* one’s eye is led *past* the trees in the foreground and not *to* them (see “The Place of Art ...”). On vacation near Le Bic in the summer of 2024, I was reminded of this observation when Amélie and I were nearly caught in a rainstorm that rolled in quickly over the St Lawrence. I sent Steven a picture of trees bending in the west wind, with the waters of the *fleuve* behind it and the north shore shrouded in the distance—but the focus was all wrong, not quite Tom Thomson. As we drove back to Lévis later that week, Thomson became jumbled up in my head with Kamouraska, where we stopped for lunch, and with memories of Anne Hébert’s novel of that title and Claude Jutra’s cinematic adaptation of it. “Hébert made that path an historic one and reminds me of troikas in Russia,” Steven wrote to me.

Of course, Steven knew the novels of Hébert and the films of Jutra—signposts of Quebec culture with which he would have thought any Canadian with a reasonable education should be familiar. In the Philosophy of Art, again, he introduced us to the poetry of Émile Nelligan, both to raise the question of what makes for a good translation and to serve as an antidote to the anti-Quebec prejudice of J. V. Andrew’s *Bilingual Today, French Tomorrow* (1977), to say nothing of Lord Durham. (—Not that he subscribed to the colonial myth of *two* founding peoples, as is clear from his later reflections on Leonard Cohen and Robert Pippin.) And he showed us the Oscar-nominated, short film *Blackwood* about the etchings of David Blackwood and the ill-fated 1914 Newfoundland seal hunt, narrated by the well-sanded voice of Gordon Pinsent. Preparing us for the final exam, Steven asked: “How often in your busy life do you have the chance to sit quietly for three hours and think about philosophy?” And, to check whether or not we were paying attention, he included a bonus question on the exam: “Who composed the Allegri *Miserere*?” (This puckish sense of humour seemed undiminished when I last saw him at home near the end of June. He was awaiting a number of visitors who were flying to Halifax to see him, and he joked that the encounters would be anticlimactic: “They’ll go home, and I won’t be dead yet!”)

Steven's speaking voice (like his singing voice) was as beautiful as Pinsent's, and it served him well as a lecturer. When he was about to retire from Dalhousie in 2006, he was invited to give the final lecture in the King's Foundation Year Programme. He remarked to me modestly that it was an easy crowd to impress because the students were primed by the special significance for them of the occasion, but there was no mistaking the emotion in the room or the hushed focus as everyone followed Steven's pursuit of his theme of silence and endings, from the police response to protestors in Paris in 1968, to finishing FYP, to retirement, to death.

Steven's longest pause approaches, but I still hear his voice in my head. I shall for a long time to come.

October 22, 2024

—Letitia Meynell (Dalhousie University)

For the last couple of weeks I've had some lyrics singing in my head—"A philo-soph-i-cal study of e-go-ism." It makes me smile and think of Steven. Let me explain.

Shortly after I arrived at Dalhousie, Richmond Campbell retired. I'm not sure how Steven discovered that Andrew and I could both more or less hold a note, but he did and he hatched a plan. We found ourselves rehearsing something to sing at Rich's retirement dinner. This was no ordinary song. The lyrics were the bibliographical details to each of Rich's books set to an Anglican (I'm guessing) liturgical chanting schema, sung, as I remember it, in a four part harmony (Janet was part of the chorus too). (Some people may now recognize the subtitle of Rich's book, *Self-Love and Self-Respect*.)

A few years later, when it was Steven's turn to have a retirement party, some of us cobbled together a Burnsified version of Monty Python's "Philosopher's Song" to sing at the Wag, where the festivities took place. All I can remember from that is rhyming Simone Weil with oenophile (much to the chagrin of Trish Glazebrook). It was, at best, a gesture, which paled in comparison to the piece that Steven had composed and directed.

The rehearsal of Rich's retirement performance was how I first got to know Steven a little. In retrospect it seems to me so characteristic of the person he was. It exemplifies Steven's love of music, the absurd, and the delightful, as well as his quiet commitment to the idea that if a thing is worth doing it's worth doing well! It also speaks to Steven's thoughtfulness and generosity when it came to his students, friends, and colleagues—not only celebrating his peer but including someone who was very junior. And it reminds me how fortunate I have been to be part of a community that he had such a large part in shaping.

October 17, 2024

Where can we go from here?

—Robbie Moser (Mount Allison University)

My first encounter with Steven was in Fall 2001 in the Dalhousie philosophy seminar room. After a Friday colloquium, faculty and students were gathered around Steven as he told everyone about his recovery from a recent medical procedure. I was a new MA student listening in from the circle. It struck me that Steven wasn't just telling the story of his recovery. He was reassuring everyone that he was well, and it dawned on me just how much everyone gathered seemed to need this reassurance that Steven was well. The effect was a powerful impression of Steven's concern for others, and others for him.

A result of that impression was that I later sought out Steven to serve as a reader of my thesis. That year I was all nerves, not self-aware enough to recognize my desperate need of something hopeful and human. Showing complete disregard of decorum and good sense, I ambushed Steven outside his office. He welcomed me with a smile and showed me in. I was embarrassed as it became clear he was hoping for a quiet moment to have his lunch. With extraordinary kindness, he asked me if it was okay that he eat his sandwich while he read over my short proposal. Steven proceeded to read my paper with such attention he seemed to forget he was holding the sandwich in his other hand, hovering above his chair's armrest. At long last he took a small bite, chewed and swallowed, and in a discussion I remember less for its detail and more for its effect, he gently led me to notice I was writing about what I thought other people believed was important, and he encouraged me to write something completely different. Then he told me he would be happy to be a reader. Months later, at the end of an emotionally tumultuous period of writing, Steven's single-page reader's report revealed how carefully and understandingly he had read my work. Of the countless papers that I have since read and lost, I still have that single page.

Many years later, in winter 2015, I invited Steven to attend an evening workshop for students on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Steven opened the session asking each of the dozen students about themselves and their interests in Wittgenstein and philosophy. Then he walked us through texts concerning the concept of private experience, subjectivity, solipsism, dualism, and skepticism. The students were rapt. This was our penultimate meeting for the workshop, and after our session with Steven one of the students asked me: "Where can we go from *here*?" They meant: What is there left for us to do after Steven in a single session demonstrated the genesis, history, transmutations and recalibrations of classic philosophical problems all through the lens of Wittgenstein's methods we had been trying to learn together. In short, there was no way to follow up that masterful lesson. Those students still have Steven's philosophical lessons. They still have the experience of a teacher who showed them the value of giving our careful attention to the ideas and in turn to one another.

October 21, 2024

Transatlantic Elective Affinities. In Memory of Steven Burns
—Herta Nagl-Docekal and Ludwig Nagl (University of Vienna)

As we mourn the passing of Steven Burns, we deplore the loss of a highly appreciated colleague and dear friend of more than four decades. It was in the late 1970s, in the context of a Wittgenstein conference in Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austria, that we first met Steven. We were introduced by the American philosophy professor Kurt Rudolf Fischer, who had been born and raised in Vienna, and from where Fischer and his parents had to flee from the Nazis. (After the war, Professor Fischer gained great importance for our generation of Viennese philosophers in terms of creating viable links to the North Atlantic academic world – a merit that is portrayed in two essays in the volume *Return from Exile – Rückkehr aus dem Exil.*)

It was decided that we should meet Steven again in 1983, at the XVII. World Congress of Philosophy in Montreal. Afterwards we, along with Steven and his wife Janet, traveled by car to Halifax – an unforgettable trip, with nights in tiny tents and a pleasant journey along the St. Lawrence River and on a ferry that was surrounded by playful Beluga whales. Steven invited us to give papers at his department. In 1992, when he was a member of the organizing committee of the joint conference of the Canadian “Learned Societies” that was held on Prince Edward Island, he invited us again. This conference of “the Learned” proved highly informative to us, as we heard papers from various disciplines of the humanities that shed light on aspects of the ethnic and cultural diversity of Canada of which we had previously not been aware in such detail. After that conference, we spent some days in Halifax, where Steven invited Ludwig to give a talk at the philosophy department at Dalhousie, and where we visited Kai Nielsen who took pride in showing us his newly installed Jacuzzi bath tub. A volume co-edited by Nielsen, *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory* (CJP, 1987), that Steven presented to us with a kind line of dedication, has proved a valuable addition to our library.

In the following years, we met so frequently on either side of the Atlantic that it would be impossible to recall each get-together. Still, one memorable experience that we shared in Vienna were the lectures that Peter Winch gave when he was invited by the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen [Institute for Human Sciences] in 1995. We were impressed by Winch’s insights into the Biblical parable of the “good Samaritan.” In 1996, when Ludwig spent the fall term as a visiting scholar at Harvard University, Steven and his wife visited us for a week that September. Apart from exploring the rich collection of newly released philosophy publications displayed at the Harvard bookstore, a particularly noteworthy event was the trip of the four of us to Concord, Massachusetts, where we saw Walden Pond and the sites commemorating the American Transcendentalists, including the Ralph Waldo Emerson House and the Concord School of Philosophy.

Meanwhile, we had founded in Vienna – together with two other young faculty members of the Philosophy Department – the book series *Wiener Reihe. Themen der Philosophie* [Vienna series. Topics of Philosophy], based on the concept of virtual international conferences bringing together different approaches on current issues. To volume 12 of that series – *Religion nach der Religionskritik* [Religion after the Criticism of

Religion], published in 2003 – Steven contributed an essay shedding light on a significant aspect of the work of Peter Winch: “Something from Nothing: Peter Winch on Philosophy and Religion”.

Steven was also well known at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, where he attended a number of events organized by the interdisciplinary commission “The North Atlantic Triangle,” contributing papers to four of its conferences and publications. Since some of the members of the “NAT” commission were chairs and faculty members of the Institutes of Canadian Studies at the Universities of Vienna and Graz, Steven’s talks were met with great admiration, as he suggested views on Canadian cultural traditions that mainstream research had failed to consider. His originality characterizes most notably his paper “Let us Compare Mythologies. Robert Pippin and the Canadian Western” that confronts an audience versed in film aesthetics with the striking question “Why are there no Canadian Westerns?” – a question that Steven discusses in terms of a sophisticated critical response to Robert B. Pippin’s concept of “glory.” Similarly, his remarkable essay, “Wittgenstein Goes West,” introduces the wide-ranging influence of Wittgenstein’s thought beyond the field of philosophy, to Canadian culture, including contemporary music. As the Embassy of Canada in Vienna was invited, on a regular basis, to the conferences of the NAT, it so happened one year that we, together with Steven and his wife, had the honor of attending a summer reception at the residence of the ambassador in Döbling, Vienna’s Cottage district. Much to his own surprise, Steven discovered that he had met the ambassador before his posting to Vienna, when he was a resident of Halifax. Steven’s most recent essay published with the Austrian Academy of Sciences has the title “A Philosopher crosses the Atlantic: Peter Winch on Philosophy and Ethics.” It was our pleasure to present his study, as well as further recent NAT publications, together with Waldemar Zacharasiewicz and two other members of the NAT commission, at the Austrian Cultural Forum in New York, in November 2019. Looking back now from the unreservedly sad perspective of Steven Burns’ passing, it seems most fitting that the last text he was to publish in Vienna is included in a book with the title *Transatlantic Elective Affinities. Traveling Ideas and their Mediators*.

October 15, 2024

Remembering Steven

—Susan Sherwin (Dalhousie University)

I arrived in the Philosophy Department of Dalhousie University in 1974 as the first woman ever to receive an academic appointment in that department. Dalhousie was not unusual in having no history of appointing women to the professorial ranks. Very few women were found in Canadian philosophy departments in the 1970’s. I will be forever grateful to Steven for the many ways in which he made clear that I belonged in the Philosophy Department. For example, he was the first faculty member to invite me to his home to meet his family (at that point the family was his wife Janet and their toddler, Maggie).

Steven worked hard at changing the face of philosophy. In addition to helping make space for women, he also promoted the academic participation and insights of people from other demographic groups. In particular, Steven was a strong proponent of the work of Canadian scholars at a time when the common assumption was that those coming from the US or the UK were likely to be better trained and more valuable colleagues, Steven was exceptionally generous with his time and attention in helping to create and support institutions that celebrated the philosophical work of Canadian scholars through the Canadian Philosophical Association (CPA) and the Atlantic Regional Philosophical Association (ARPA).

Steven was a wonderful colleague in so many ways. He shouldered Departmental duties when needed. For many years, he assumed the role of Graduate Co-ordinator and he was instrumental in building a strong graduate program, including the launch of the PhD program. He was a regular and active participant in the weekly department colloquium and the celebratory beers in the Pub that followed each session. He was a major force for promoting and preserving a positive environment in the Philosophy Department, and I know that much of my success is a direct result of the collegiality he helped to generate and support.

I am so grateful to have had Steven near throughout my professional career and I will miss his good humour, his passion for philosophical ideas, and his own interesting take on so many different questions. He was a very special colleague and friend.

October 21, 2024

On Steven Burns

—Will Sweet (St. Francis Xavier University)

I am not sure when I first met Steven Burns. I think it was about 1992, when I attended a symposium on Canadian philosophy at Mount Allison. There, he gave a paper on the Canadian philosopher Jacob Gould Schurman. Schurman is certainly not a household name; he came from PEI, studied at Acadia (where Steven also studied), taught at Dalhousie, and moved on to Cornell, where he was one of the founders of *The Philosophical Review*. I'm not sure why Steven became interested in Schurman, other than, perhaps, that, it reflected a general interest that Steven had in the promotion of Canadian philosophy and the history of philosophy in Canada. I was always intrigued by such indications – and there were many – of what I considered to be whimsical, yet serious, and irenic behaviour.

Of course, Steven's philosophical interests were wide-ranging, perhaps befitting one who studied Wittgenstein and Winch so closely. We would meet at philosophy conferences, at ARPA and at the CPA, but also from time to time during my visits to Halifax and his periodic visits to St Francis Xavier to talk on a range of subjects related to aesthetics or Nietzsche or Wagner. He was always supportive of my work, which overlaps slightly with his own, and I was humbled when he nominated me to serve as President of the CPA in 2007; he should have been nominated himself. And I discovered, again quite by

accident, that we had mutual friends in many other parts of the world, such as our mutual friends Herta Nagl-Docekal and Ludwig Nagl.

I came across a document recently where Steven recounted the founding and early years of ARPA. I recall, at that time, that there had been some debate about what exactly to call the association. Steven liked to call it the ‘Atlantic Philosophical Association’ or, as he put it, “the real APA.” I guess it was a bit of Canadian humility or over-seriousness when, in the end, we went with “Atlantic Region Philosophical Association.” Some of you will have noticed in some of his emails that he identified himself as the “Regent” of ARPA. The story behind this was that Steven liked the quasi-anarchic character of the Atlantic region meetings, and thought that each department sponsoring it should be able to do it however they liked. He wanted no executive, no hierarchy, no big financial organization. Still, it was important to have some kind of stability, and when, at a meeting at Memorial University in 2005, he declined to be President, I (jokingly) said that he should therefore be the Regent, and my proposition met with general approval. Although I don't think he was initially taken by having the designation, it seemed to grow on him and, again I think it fit his sense of whimsy.

In all of my encounters with Steven, I found that he was a sane and thoughtful presence who wanted people to be serious about, but also enjoy, philosophy. He was not only a familiar face in Halifax; his influence extended far beyond the region. I last heard from him late in the summer when he said that he would not be attending the ARPA meetings at Memorial this year. I had hoped that I would see him before he left us, and I very much regret that we weren't able to meet. Still, his presence remains, and it is fair to say that he inspires many of us.

October 15, 2024

Steven Burns

—Béla Szabados (University of Regina)

I met Steven at the 1976 meetings of the Canadian Philosophical Association at Laval University in Quebec City. After attending a paper, Steven, Wes Cragg and I spontaneously continued the discussion and afterward, we decided to explore the nooks and crannies of the Old City. Famished, we had something to eat at a restaurant and eventually ended up at the lounge of the grand Chateau Frontenac. The terrace offered a striking view of the Saint Lawrence. It was early June, a sunny afternoon with a cool breeze, and we could see ships and even whales coming and going. Inspired by the sublime view and the lively discussion in this distinctive Canadian setting, and no doubt fortified by a bottle of Guinness, I felt as if we could accomplish all sorts of great things in this vast and open country that was our home—but it was not clear to me what.

As it turned out, we all had a connection to Alberta: Steven and Wes were students at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and after doing an MA there, went on to London and Oxford respectively to do their doctoral work. And I got my Ph.D. at the newly minted University of Calgary. I felt that we were kindred spirits: ethics, aesthetics, Wittgenstein

and Wagner's music offered lots to talk about. And indeed we remained friends in philosophy throughout our lives. Steven was generous with his time, he had read and commented on many of my philosophical endeavours and was kind enough to write a preface to one of my books. And this on top of his own work and administrative obligations. I attach a photo of Steven with his fellow symposiasts at the CPA meetings held at Montreal's Concordia University in 2010.

October 13, 2024



Andrew Lugg, Béla Szabados, Mélissa Thériault, Steven Burns (CPA 2010)

Recollections of Steven on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday
—Tom Vinci (Dalhousie)

Dear Steven,

Let me count the ways.

Setting people straight:

You and Hans-Günther were at dinner in our somewhat rundown 3,000 sq. foot penthouse apartment in Somerset Place on South Park Street. It was an indulgence for us in the last 5 years while I was still in the Department. (Not bragging – not really – but the

place was pretty amazing.) One of the features that Hans-Günther most admired was the inside-the-apartment washer and dryer, which I told him about early on during dinner. Apparently his apartment was not so-equipped. Somewhat later during dinner the question of the *exact* location of the machines came up and I said that they were just down the corridor. “Oh” H-G said, eyes a gleam, “thought you said that they were *inside* the apartment.” About to answer this impertinence, I was forestalled by Steven: “down the corridor, inside the apartment.” Not only washer and dryer inside the apartment, but a corridor to boot!

Told this story at your retirement dinner, but it bears repeating. There was, in the distant past in our department, a colleague by the name of “Terry Tomkow.” Very smart and philosophically astute – the department is intellectually poorer for his leaving (that is another story)—he was, nevertheless, a fearsome presence intellectually and personally. Just the sort of person needing to be put firmly in his place. But *Where?* and *By whom?* and *How?* In the Department lounge on Henry Street; by Steven Burns and with the by-now legendary put-down made to Terry just after his praising the importance of being of good character: “And you offer yourself as an example?” Only Steven could have pulled that off.

Scholar:

It is something I – all of us I think – look forward to in the Friday Colloquium with great anticipation—Steven’s question. The anticipation is generally lengthened by Steven himself after his question has been recognized but before it is made Word. Always worth the wait! Sometimes it is a duel with another Wittgenstein buff, sometimes it is a reminder that all of it is just a footnote to Plato, at other times it is a reminder that philosophical discourse can be fun and can be about things that are fun. Steven is an exemplary philosopher – the best that the Western Academy has to offer.

Scary guy:

Steven is a scary guy. It’s not the menacing glare – he has no menacing glare. It’s not the unanswerable putdown (not usually, anyway). It’s not the quick and devastating counterexample. It’s not anything, really. It’s just the thought of what Steven Burns would be like if he got angry. Never happened, as far as I know. Like to keep it that way!

Lead-off man:

We used to have a softball team from the Department that played in the Dal summer softball league. I played in the field, pretty well I thought, but I did not hit the ball with any reliability. Big swing, pop-up to the first baseman usually. So not a leadoff man myself. But Steven was. Regularly hit the ball between infielders on the right side of the field, just deep enough so that they couldn’t catch it, not so deep that the right fielder had a chance. Steven: Mr. Reliability.

Steven (with Janet) of the famous Burns’-after-the-Friday-Colloquium parties:

Not really a party goer myself I have to say, but I do like to eat. This can be done only when there is food, real food, as there is, in abundance, at a Burns’ after-the-Friday-

Colloquium party. I find a place by the stew pot and the bread and cheese boards, pretending that I am there for the conversation.

Steven and French:

Unlike most Anglo-Canadian philosophers, myself included, Steven is fluent in French. Can go to, and understand!, lectures by our French speaking colleagues at the CPAs, which he attends with pleasure and regularity (Mr. Reliability again). He can ask questions in French. We are all envious and impressed.

Steven and German:

Steven and Janet spend time every year in Vienna, ordering pastries and talking to people in German. We are all envious and impressed.

Much enjoyed writing this. Hope you get some pleasure in reading it. Happy 80th birthday, Steven. Many more to come.

Love, Tom.

Shediac, March 16, 2021

The Friday Philosophers

—James Young (University of Victoria)

Steven spent the 1992-1993 academic year on sabbatical and based in Victoria. He became integral part of the Victoria philosophical community. In those days, members of the community would meet every Friday afternoon at Spinnakers Brewpub for some beer and conversation and Steven soon became a fixture on these Friday occasions. Competition to be the most committed member of this Friday beer klatch was keen, particularly since an engraved mug was presented at the end of the year to the philosopher who attended the most Friday sessions. Until 1992-93, the award had been for the calendar year, but Steven successfully persuaded the group to award the prize on the basis of attendance over an academic year so that he could compete with a chance to win. Ed Mares, now of Victoria University of Wellington, was a sessional at UVic during this same academic year and he was equally determined to win the prize. Jim Young was, of course, a perennial contender. As the academic year unfolded, it was clear that the contest would be a three-way race between Steven, Ed and Jim and the race generated intense interest, as first one of this trio pulled ahead, and then another. After someone (who shall remain nameless) stopped at the pub on the way to the airport to catch a Friday afternoon flight, and then claimed to have attended, strict rules had to be developed governing what counted as attendance at a session of the Spinnakers Academy. In the end, Steven's perseverance and commitment to philosophy and beer paid off and he was declared co-champion of the 1992-93 academic year as the contest ended in a three-way tie. Hanging from a hook at Spinnakers, there may still be a pewter beer stein engraved:

The Friday Philosophers
Steven Burns
Edwin Mares
James Young
1992-93

October 14, 2024

in memoriam Steven Burns
— Jan Zwicky (University of Victoria)

Steven Burns was an embodiment of Socratic philosophic spirit. It was wisdom he sought, rather than eristic victory. And he sought it in order to lead a moral life. He understood that the arts were essential to the development of a whole and integrated intellect, and that there was no practice of philosophy without them. This vision lives on in his written work and will continue to sustain us.

October 21, 2024
