

Eulogy for John Grattan Fitz Gibbon  
July 12, 1934 – October 25, 2009

It was a cold, damp day, when John Fitz Gibbon died. The snow was on the ground in Santa Fe. The 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter moon was in its half full phase. Something significant was missing. Something was very wrong. Our very dear friend was gone. It was a dark, damp day.

In celebrating his life today, let us remember Fitz and his many talents.

Let us remember his brilliance, his mother-lode of knowledge, which put him at the top of his freshman class at Berkeley and as a First Rank Scholar at Yale.

Let us remember his sense of humor in his stories, comments and conceptions, such as the addition to the Yale Art Gallery over Skull and Bones, the near-by secret society tomb, a building in the shape of the State of California to house his art collection: as he would put it, “life over death”.

Let us remember his teaching prowess par excellence, his unencumbered eye and insight, his penetrating intuition, which aroused in so many a state of wonder.

Let us remember his exquisite taste in art, in opera, in wine and eclectic taste in racing horses and in motorcycles.

Let us remember his imagination and his need to bring to life something new and necessary, the Pilot Hill performances, those well choreographed enactments of ancient myths.

Let us remember the support and encouragement he readily and willingly gave, even to those who had tip-toed into abstract expressionism.

Let us remember his courage in transferring to Yale and to a very different academic culture in his sophomore year with his very beautiful wife, Jane, and very young daughter, Kate; his courage to speak his not-always-popular mind; his courage to live in and try to repair a wasted culture in a weary world; his courage to endure a horrific disability these past 20 years without whining or shaking a fist at Heaven, a disease mitigated, as best it could be, by the constant care and continuing presence of his devoted wife, Jane, whose efforts would have gotten the attention of Mother Theresa, were she still alive.

But I respectfully suggest there was a predominant trait, to which all the others bowed their heads in homage: his need to have a friend and be a friend. Why else would he use the word “friend” 78 times in “California A – Z and Return” and write: “If I have said once that the content of art is friendship and love, I have said it 987 times but I say it again now”? Or why would he use the word “friend” 83 times in “The Pilot Hill Collection” catalogue and write: “My thesis is that Friendship is a major content of art”, significantly capitalizing the “F” in “Friendship” but not the “a” in “art”? And why would he cite the passage in “A la Recherche du Temps Perdu”, by Marcel Proust in which the narrator degrades friendship because one is always adjusting one’s true self to a friend’s personality and condoning in a friend a vice that would otherwise be reprehensible: “Only a Frenchman”, he wrote in a letter to me, “ would rather have ideas than friends or rather love ideas than people”? And why would “Le Grand Meaulnes”, by Alain-Fournier, be his favorite novel, a story chiefly about the friendship of three young men, the narrator, Meaulnes, and Frantz? Fitz told me many times that this book reflected his life and to understand it was to understand him. It is my view that the essence of this novel is and the essence of his life as well was friendship.

He visited Joanne and me in the early 1980s and chastised us for the Rembrandt reproductions hanging on our walls. He said we had a moral obligation to buy art from living artists to help them pay the rent and to surround ourselves with beauty. Assuming correctly we didn’t know any artists, he suggested we send him money and promised to return to us museum quality art. We did send him modest amounts each month for several

years, and, yes, indeed, we were never disappointed with the results. Thus the trifecta: artist, Reeses, Fitz, an impresario with a portrait plan: to have Jim Albertson do a portrait of each of 50 Yale classmates, friends of Fitz or would be friends, to be exhibited in the Yale Art Gallery at our 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion. Unfortunately, the Art Gallery was closed for renovations during for that event three years ago.

Vladimir Nabokov reported that, when he was a young man and living in a Russian mansion before the revolution, a friend peddled his bicycle 25 miles to spend the weekend with him. Early the next morning, while everyone was asleep, Nabokov snuck out of the house to hunt for butterflies, in spite of the guilt he felt for loving butterflies more than being with a friend. If I had flown 2500 miles to spend a weekend with Fitz and if he had the same love for butterflies, he would catch a butterfly for me. Friendship for Fitz trumped everything else.

And if I were incarcerated in some Turkish jail for many years or in a coma, if my bones were jail bars and my skull solitary confinement, and, if by some fluke, a key appeared to set me free or wonder drug, he'd be among the first to welcome me, to shake my hand and tell me all the books that I should read and movies I should see and music I should hear. He would review the art exhibits that I'd missed and usher me to studios of friends to see their recent work. And there would be a party at Pilot Hill for me with exciting people, wonderful conversation and laughter, and there would be delicious California salads and Charlone Chardonnay, and it would be fantastic. And when the guests had gone, he'd place a mattress on the lawn beside the pool for me, as he did at Pinky's wedding, and when I awoke the sun would be shining, the birds singing, the flowers in bloom, the American River gently gliding by, and I would think, as I did then, I'd died and gone to Heaven. He was such a friend. Such a proud Irish friend, proud of his family and friends.

There was another Irishman, proud of his friends, a Nobel laureate, who wrote about their portraits hanging in the Municipal Gallery. I'm certain Fitz knew of this, which might have given him the idea for the Albertson portraits. Just before he died, William Butler Yeats wrote:

“You that would judge me do not judge alone  
This book or that; come to this hallowed place  
Where my friend's portraits hang and look thereon,  
Ireland's history in their lineaments trace;  
Think where man's glory most begins and ends  
And say my glory was I had such friends.”

I say John Grattan Fitz Gibbon's glory was he had such friends, a glory that is here in this room, this afternoon. Look to your right; look to you left; you'll find a friend of Fitz. I am privileged to have been included in that company: I got much more than I gave. And so, dear husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather, brother, friend, dear friend, may you rest in peace. May the dear Lord have mercy on your soul.

William H. H. Rees  
December 20, 2009