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In Memoriam

Patrick Michael Quinn, 1942-2025

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Patrick Quinn, who died on 4 January 2025 at the age of 83, was a terrific friend and political comrade for 55 years. Compared to me, he always seemed to have a larger-than-life personality. He was extroverted, gregarious, approachable, and often affable and even playful—“with amazing raconteurial gifts and a more retentive memory than a herd of elephants.

With intimates and political comrades, he was affectionate, demonstrative, and warm. His feelings were as strong as his opinions were incisive, and he could speak with sharpened-tongued certainty about all sorts of things—literature, sports, regional history, and Marxist politics. In public discussions, he had passion and presence, usually asking the right questions, paying attention to what other people were saying, and mostly responding in affirmative if critical ways.

I had many close personal interactions with Patrick, but these were largely by mail, conversations at political conferences, and occasional visits by me to the city where he lived or by him to mine. Even when we had a political falling out in 1973, which lasted a few years, communication remained intact. No doubt his beloved life partner Mary, his daughters Abra and Rachel, other relatives, and those who knew him on a day-to-day basis in common political organizations, will provide exact biographical details and very different perceptions of his character and contributions. (Some autobiographical material about his unusual family upbringing is contained in this article: <https://atthelakemagazine.com/patrick-quinn-still-searching/>). Here are just a few of my own brief recollections that come to mind at this painful moment, which are interrelated with our shared interest in history and literature.

For example, I well remember the day of 1 September 1979 when Patrick drove me to the internment of the novelist James T. Farrell in Calvary Cemetery in Evanston. There we met and talked with William “Studs” Lederer, who claimed he was model for Farrell’s Studs Lonigan character in his famous trilogy. Around that same time Patrick also happened to visit Manhattan when I was doing research, and he joined me one evening when I went to interview modernist composer Virgil Thompson for my book about the Trotskyist poets John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan. (Thompson had always composed a musical portrait of Socialist Workers Party leader James P. Cannon.) Thompson’s room was at the legendary Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street, and afterwards we were so hyped up by the experience that we skipped the subway and continued our animated conversation as we walked about 40 blocks uptown to the place where we were staying.

On these and similar occasions, Patrick was always good company—avuncular, witty, and erudite, speaking in a rich and resonant voice. He was among a half-dozen people I frequently asked to read over rough drafts of several of my books and essays, for his skill in this area was prenatal. Somehow, he understood that his role was not to foster his own views but to grasp what I was trying to do and say, helping me toward a better job. Although Patrick may never have achieved all that to which he aspired in his own efforts to publish fiction and poetry, I saw in his editorial skill tantalizing hints of another career that might have been.

Nevertheless, Patrick would be the last person to want me to remember him as having been cooked up in some “Perfect Man Lab.” Yes, he could be a fearless critic of others’ narrow orthodoxies and organizational bullying, but he could also be mercurial, stubborn and sometimes capricious—with a penchant for deeply held grudges. When overtaken by a foul temper he was notoriously rude and crude—rubbishing this or that person like an insult comic. Then, suddenly, he might revert to an old-fashioned gravitas, turning cerebral and introspective, offering a cool evaluation of events and people.

Once I was sitting next to him at a socialist political convention and he kept whispering to me his unhappiness with the remarks of certain comrades that suggested he was undergoing a dark and rising anger. When he himself finally rose to speak I was afraid that he might act like a bad boy out of control and send the meeting into turmoil; instead, he performed like a trooper, exuding confidence in our future and buoying our spirits.

In recent years I saw him less and less, and probably some of his harder edges were filed down as he aged. But despite his many other interests and the political disappointments we both faced, I saw no evidence that he made a disillusioned retreat from politics to private life and aesthetic satisfaction

Marked by a compelling persona of depth and sensitivity, emotional awareness and authenticity, Patrick's memory aura will be one I will never shake.

PS:

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