An Obituary for a Man – and for Times Past

Bryan Southcombe died on 7th March, aged 69, and my wife and I attended his funeral and the après funeral on March 14th.

While much of the day focused on personal memories I found myself pondering the way the world had changed during the expansive and remarkable “Life of Bryan”, a man who had kept the company of film stars, entertainers, Presidents, and Kings.

My first dealings with Bryan were in 1985 as a venture-capital manager for the “Onyx Furs” project.

The ferret or fitch fur business, then developing in New Zealand, was proving vulnerable to the volatile pricing of commodity furs. A Nelson fur farmer had the idea of teaming up with ex-Nelsonian Bryan, who was living in France, to turn the furs into high fashion coats using New Zealand fur, French design and Korean manufacturers. Bryan was a colleague and neighbour of the famous photographer David Hamilton, who was keen to be a fashion designer and use his photographic skills to promote his own label. The team looked good.

The only cloud on the horizon was the new campaign against the fur trade because of the native species being endangered by the industry. I argued that Onyx Furs would be immune to the campaign because the ferrets were not only farmed but were also a pest. Onyx Furs would reduce the pressure on endangered species and hence would be welcomed by the campaigners.

It all seemed very reasonable, but proved to be dead wrong.

The anti-fur campaigners didn’t give a toss whether a fur was made from an ocelot or a ferret. They had discovered an excuse to throw rotten eggs and tofu cream pies at the rich and glamorous – the real target of their campaign.

So although Bryan managed to get an Onyx store opened in the Byblos Hotel in St Tropez, – harder than you might think in that highly regulated market – and although David Hamilton chose the very young Rachel Hunter to be his “Face of the Year” – while she wore an Onyx coat – the whole venture bombed. The sole beneficiary was Rachel, who left for Australia en route to New York and well deserved fame and fortune.

The original Puritans banned bear baiting, not because of the pain it caused the bear, but because of the pleasure it gave the people. Onyx was my first experience with the New Puritans.
Shortly afterwards, Bryan came home to live in New Zealand. He presumed that his connections in Europe could help launch new business opportunities in New Zealand, and was genuinely excited by the prospects. Government is currently trying to attract expatriates back home on the same premise.

During his last years in St Tropez, where he was the “unofficial” Mayor, Bryan had put together the 1981 “Nioulargue” – now transformed into the famous “Les Voiles de Saint-Tropez”, a regatta for Classic Yachts. It began as a two yacht contest but these days over 100 crews and owners gather to sail and generally enjoy the good life. Bryan’s aim was to extend the St Tropez summer season into autumn. It worked.

By the time he moved to New Zealand in 1990 Bryan’s friends in France were encouraging him to repeat the “Nioulargue” in Auckland. They longed for an excuse to come to the South Pacific and wanted to be sure of a fun time when they got here.

Bryan packaged up an “Auckland Nioulargue” and five of his friends sailed their magnificent yachts down to Auckland where they sailed, partied, and enjoyed a meal under the stars on Rangitoto Island.

For all the attention it got from the media you would have thought he had mounted an egg-and-spoon race in Hamilton.

His European friends had done their bit for Auckland, but Aucklanders were not interested – he could not raise ongoing sponsorship.

The overt reason was that all sponsorship was focused on the forthcoming America’s Cup. Bryan emphasized that Auckland’s Nioulargue would be an annual event while the America’s Cup could not be guaranteed from one contest to the next.

We could have had our own Les Voiles running now during Ak07. It was not to be.

While watching all this from the sidelines, or from Bryan’s drinks table, I could see the New Puritanism at work. This regatta was about fun, glamour and beauty. One of the classic yachts had been built for Errol Flynn! But Auckland’s image of sailing was of grim-faced men toughing it out in the Southern Ocean in high-tech machines. That was ice dripping off their moustaches – not champagne.

So, Bryan thought, if the America’s Cup is the race, I’ll join it. He knew the New Zealand born architect, now living in France, who designed the top of the line Aman Resorts operated by Adrian Zeccha. Adrian wanted to build a resort in Auckland in time for the first defence of
The Americas’ Cup. He regarded his client list as a club and wanted to be able to offer them suitable accommodation in New Zealand. The Auckland Aman would be the flagship but would be supported by maybe five of his second-tier, but still luxurious, hotels.

Bryan and I teamed up again, and we identified a splendid 105 acre site overlooking Piha Beach, and soon had interested parties in Waiwera, Taupo, Nelson and Queenstown.

Other countries line up to attract an Aman Resort because Adrian sets the standard for everyone else. His track record in restoring ecologies, nurturing endangered species, supporting local growers, and promoting indigenous art, meant that Governments worldwide make him welcome.

At first Waitakere City responded warmly. Adrian came down, saw the site and enthused, and when he met Mayor Harvey and his CEO all seemed to be going well.

But then the word got out that this resort was for the rich and famous, much to the distress of such simple-living folk as neighbour Sandra Coney and the Waitakere Ranges Protection Society. Locals were soon complaining that they didn’t want rich people looking down on their seaside slum. Evidently the impact of a thirty room resort was more than the environment could bear, even though scores of thousands of people visit Piha every summer. Rich people must have super-large feet.

I was preparing the resource consent application when the bomb finally fell. I received a call from Mayor Harvey saying that the resource consent would be jeopardized by my ongoing involvement and Adrian should hand the consulting work over to a more “appropriate” group closely associated with Council’s staff.

The list of consultants was long and expensive. Bryan received a letter explaining that they wanted the job but if they did not get it reserved the right to object. I stepped aside but Adrian was dismayed and his heart went out of the project.

Had he proposed a 400 room hostel for beneficiary back-packers it might well have flown through.

That was Bryan’s last attempt to bring a major project to New Zealand.

Bryan was an optimist and loved to see people’s eyes light up with delight – whether from putting on a fur coat, sailing on a magnificent yacht or luxuriating in a stunning resort.
Unfortunately he came to live in a time and place where optimists are heretics and delight is a dirty word. Politicians used to promise happiness and plenty. Now, as Al Gore has found, there is more profit in preaching doom, gloom, hell-fire and the deluge.

In spite of it all, Bryan personally lit up many of our lives and brought delight to many a gathering of friends.

We shall not see his like again.

Owen McShane