

Rundle: an obituary for Bill Leak, and his monstrous exploitation by The Australian

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Crikey

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Yesterday's Bill Leak cartoon

De Mortuis Nisi Nil Bonum, especially when you suspect your exit may be in the same manner as the decedent. In this case, Bill Leak, who — after 30-plus years of high-functioning alcoholism, drug use, injury and mishap, and a decade cleanish — after the last of these, has died at the age of 61. Rock star heart, they call it, the vital muscle hard as a hockey puck from overwork. Sixty-one is young to check out. Leak is lucky he got that. That pitch off the balcony that nearly killed him also saved him.

De Mortuis Nisi Nil Bonum. Leak was a great artist, a genuine master, and he was a genuinely funny cartoonist about once a week, which is about as often as anyone is genuinely funny. Good newspapers rotate their cartoonists for that reason, but the *Oz* needed Leak, as a forward force for their multi-front culture war.

“The Left hounded him to death,” said his far less talented mate Rowan Dean. “Bill was obsessive, working to 4am.” So 30 years of fucking your own shit up, and then, in grand fashion, replacing the piss with politics of an obsessive order, something

the *Oz* editors were only too happy to use. “Who killed Bill Leak? I,” said the ed, wanting four cartoons a week.

De Mortuis Nisi Nil Bonum, but really, the man is being utterly overrated. “Bill Leak was the most courageous man I knew,” said Greg Sheridan in the *Pravda*-style memorial to him on the weekend. He was outdone by Jennifer Oriel this morning, it what may be the worst piece of writing published in a major paper in the last 20 years, something that does not appear to have been even cursorily edited. What sort of service is this to a colleague, to use his death as something more to lob out of the trenches? How pathetic. How shaming. How absurd too, for their argument — that the vociferous criticism Leak received from many quarters over past years hurried him onto his demise. Surely that would indicate that words are not simply the exchange of free speech, but have a material power. I mean, if you thought, really thought, that criticism could directly cause fatal heart attacks, what person would not consider curbs on free speech, what monster would not consider restrictions upon them? Dean, Oriel and others appear to be using Leak’s death to make Gillian Triggs’ argument about the justification for 18C, that words are acts.

De Mortuis Nisi Nil Bonum, but Leak was like many right-wing cartoonists (Spooner in a different mode is another example): men, mostly men, whose artistic ability limits their capacity for reflection on the source of their own beliefs. Left-wing cartoonists like Petty or Pope retain their ratiocinative ability. Right-sided ones collapse into muttering misanthropy, let themselves be put to work by forces who couldn’t give a shit about the genuine artistry that goes into a cartoon. Leak needed such in the end, because he’d lost a lot of his friends from the libertarian left, and a lot of the beliefs that animated him in his more expansive, optimistic years. He’s not the only one to use politics to stay off the piss, but he’s the most spectacular example of it. His oeuvre will last, but like most of us, he’ll be forgotten in five minutes, and this Stalinist hagiography he’s been used for will look embarrassing and cynical.

De Mortuis Nisi Nil Bonum.