



The Coolest Guy

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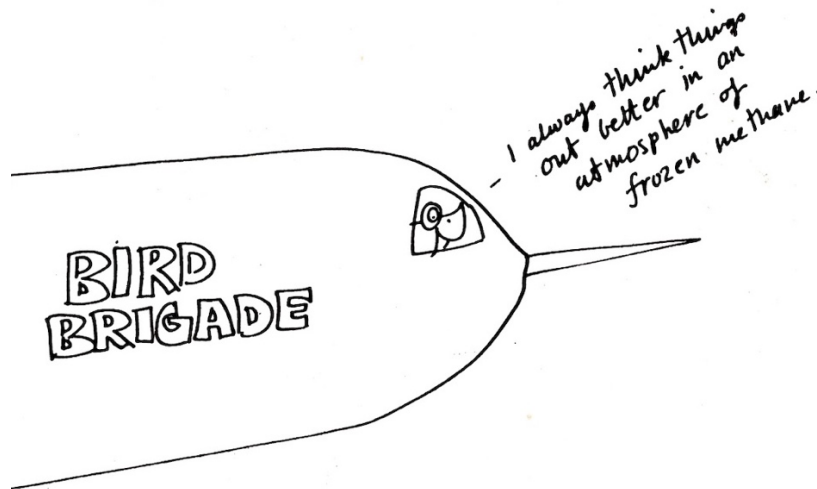
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The Coolest Guy

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Detail, “The Adventures of Destructo-Duck” (1969) by David McClelland.

When I’ve written about David C.K. McClelland before, I’ve hemmed and hawed on the word “genius.” It’s a word that dares the reader to be skeptical, a word we hear too much, one that seems to reverse itself mischievously. It flickers like the electron, whose speed and position can’t be known at the same time. But some people—a tiny number—actually are geniuses, and you need the word. David McClelland was a genius.

Recently someone at a party told me that there are no adverbs in the Bible. The statement stunned me, but I couldn’t think of a counter example until I was back in my car: “The [chariot] driving is like the driving of Jehu, for he driveth furiously.” Then, even better, I remembered, “I come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” Such a

hopeful adverb, “abundantly!” The calligraphic works of David McClelland in the collection of Houghton Library are just one part of a fruitful and glorious abundance.

There are specialist-geniuses and multi-subject-geniuses. David fell into the second category, with his gifts in art, music, poetry, comedy, calligraphy, cartooning, philosophy, and folklore. The last one is especially important because the figure of the genius exists in a realm of folklore. People pass along the news of encounters with a genius, as if they’d come upon a natural wonder in the forest. Everything David did had a special character. For example, he sat in a cool way. One or two photographs capture the style of his sitting, how he gathered himself to a point when he occupied a chair and distributed himself in it just so. People who witnessed the cool things he did remembered him and shared their stories.

I heard about David long before I met him. My mother directed a play at Western Reserve Academy, in Hudson, Ohio, the town we lived in, and she brought home copies of the school newspaper that featured his cartoons. She wanted me to see them; I became an instant fan. When I went to the school myself, David had moved on to Harvard and his work was appearing in the *Lampoon*, to which the school subscribed. Sprawling in the big leather chairs in the school library and disappearing into his multi-page drawings, I briefly transcended the here and now. One moment stands out: I was reading his “The New Adventures of Destructo-Duck,” in which the main character and his Feathered Freedom Fighters are trying to stop nuclear war strategist Herman Kahn from dropping all the free world’s hydrogen bombs on Goa. They travel to Neptune to get some perspective on the problem, and Destructo-Duck says, “I always think things out better in an atmosphere of frozen methane.” I read that sentence, and nothing as explicit as the revealing of a vocation occurred, but I did get a sense that I’d found the general direction I wanted to go in life.

Eventually I met him in person, when I followed him to Harvard and he brought me to the *Lampoon*. I had no goal in college except to do what he did—draw cartoons for the *Lampoon*. I was the oldest of five siblings, my older-brother slot was open, and David filled it. Eventually you learn that the hero worship you feel at that age is sweet and boundless, and not to be repeated. David had a wacky, cheerful, and weirdly dangerous air, very glamorous to me; his metal-rimmed glasses added ice to his gaze, and his hair extended from each side of his head like ebullient scrollwork he might have drawn himself. His (actual) younger brother, Bill, and I became friends in high school, and I met Tim, the youngest McClelland brother, not long after. With them I fished, played golf, and went to baseball games. But with David, sports never came up; I never mentioned the subject. He chose what we talked about, and I listened. His athleticism was all mental. He made me feel as if my brain were a bicycle suspended in the center of my skull, and he got on it and pedaled much faster than I could. Then he would jump off and the wheels would keep on spinning when I was alone. He had an amazing laugh, which sometimes started out as a benign 19th-century chuckle and accelerated to a wheezing, red-faced,

all-out, hilarity-fueled Modernist paroxysm of pure glee. When I was 20, I would rather listen to him riff, and laugh with him, than do anything. A monologue of his might begin with a disquisition on the prose of Gertrude Stein, move on to how mental hospitals “imprisoned consciousness,” and segue into a plan to construct a giant electric guitar using bridge cables for strings. “Entirely feasible,” he would assure me.

At an event in memory of David at the Signet Society in 2019, Tim said something that I thought connected to the subject of David and folklore. Tim is a jeweler and a sculptor, and he often makes impressions of shapes so that he can use the negative space for reproductions. Tim said that David had made an impression on each of us who were there—a crowd of 60 or 70—and we would always carry the shape of that impression; and that if we put all those impressions together, we would have something like a whole image of David; and so in a sense, he was there with us at that moment.

Bill and Tim did a book, *The Inspirations of David C. K. McClelland* (2019), that brought together a lot of his work, and they included short pieces by people who had known him. Each piece is another impression, a flash of the strobe showing a different aspect. Ted Widmer, a writer and scholar who belonged to the *Lampoon* 15 years after David, first encountered him in Tommy’s Lunch, a now-vanished diner in Cambridge. David had drawn all over one of the pillars, and the drawings endured through many generations of students; Widmer remembered being aware of bulging cartoon eyes staring at him. After he found out who had drawn those eyes, he went through back issues in the *Lampoon*’s archive looking for David’s work. The magazine has existed for almost a hundred and fifty years. Many famous artists and writers have been on its staff. Widmer concluded that David is the most talented person it ever published.¹

For his college roommate, Michael Thompson, David provided a glimpse into a wildly racing mind when one of his manic phases took over. “He was the first person to describe the process of psychotherapy for me, and he made the concept of the unconscious vivid,” Thompson wrote.² (He did the same for me, as he sometimes described the mind and its pulse-quickenning susceptibility to craziness.) David is one of the reasons that Thompson became a mental health professional. The actor Kathryn Walker, who had met him in a Celtic Department course in Middle Irish, saved the letters he sent her (many of us saved his letters). She wrote that now these letters, with his writing and drawings on them, and sometimes bearing a hodgepodge of insufficient postage, “seem like some extravagant artifact out of another time, another century.”³ Peter Scott, a friend from high school, remembered when he and David learned to talk like Donald Duck. Such a great memory!

¹ See Ted Widmer, “I dreamt I was a butterfly,” in *The Inspirations of David C. K. McClelland* (W. & T. McClelland, 2019), 32–34.

² Michael Thompson, “In the Night Kitchen with David McClelland,” in *The Inspirations of David C. K. McClelland* (W. & T. McClelland, 2019), 60.

³ Kathryn Walker, “On Hearing from David,” in *The Inspirations of David C. K. McClelland* (W. & T. McClelland, 2019), 183.

David could talk *exactly* like Donald Duck. His Donald Duck was indistinguishable from the original. I am weeping with laughter right now as I remember David fooling around and sputtering and cursing in his Donald Duck voice.

David was awarded a *summa* for his Folklore and Mythology thesis on the folklore of the Welsh colony in Patagonia, which is at the end of the earth in Argentina. How he came to write the thesis was a miracle of serendipity and enterprise. In *The Inspirations of David C. K. McClelland*, David Lagomarsino, now an emeritus professor of European history at Dartmouth, described his and David's summer-vacation journey to that place.

Lagomarsino, who grew up in Argentina, knew that a colony of Welsh people had established themselves in Patagonia in the early 20th century. They hoped to live independently and preserve their traditions, isolated in that Ultima Thule. Lagomarsino wanted to study them, but he needed a partner with a knowledge of Welsh language and culture; David, as a Celtic scholar and polymath, fit the requirements. Harvard gave them funds and a tape recorder, and between their junior and senior years the two made the journey. They flew to Buenos Aires, wangled a pickup truck, drove on dangerous roads. All the to-be-expected difficulties of travel in remote regions challenged them. Reaching the colony, they made friends and accumulated tapes full of Welsh tales. Most people live their whole lives without experiencing an adventure anywhere near as fabulous.

One of the best travel books of all time is *In Patagonia*, by Bruce Chatwin, the British novelist and journalist. Chatwin went to Patagonia in 1974, and his book came out in 1977. It makes me happy and proud to think that David Mc. & David L. were there six years earlier, and already knew about this enchanted place.

After college David moved to New York City, which he loved. For a while he worked for *Sesame Street*, a then-new show. He drew cartoons for the *National Lampoon* and wrote pieces for *Harper's Magazine* and the *New Yorker*. When I graduated and moved to Chicago, and was adrift there, he wrote me a letter and said I must come to New York. I remember the envelope and the letter and his elegant, headlong handwriting—what a rescue-rope it was. When I arrived, David took me around, found me a place to stay, and introduced me to writers who later became mentors and friends. His letter hadn't revealed that the crueler side of his genius had got a new hold on him. Sometimes when I saw him in the city, he was manic and lost, with his energy flying off into space. His interest in my news was a point he steered toward in heavy weather, focusing diligently while twisting his hair in his nimble fingers. Today the cruel side of his genius would be reined in with medications, but back then he took it on by himself. I was mainly afraid for him; in retrospect his soldiering-on alone seems even more courageous and admirable.

Many of us remember the last time we saw David. For me it was on 14th Street, after an inconclusive get-together with an acquaintance he wanted me to meet. David stood on the sidewalk and said goodbye like someone at the rail of a ship. He was like nobody else I ever met, like nobody any of us ever met. At his best moments he was more alive and

exciting—he had life more abundantly—than anybody. Hanging on my wall is a print he made of a quote from Sophocles. In David’s jostling capital letters, each one like a living individual, it says,

Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the
nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well.

None of us were at an advanced age when we knew David, but now that I think of it, perhaps he was. He had an acute sense of the timeless, which is why my Sophocles print, like all David’s work, has held up so well.

Thanks to the foresight of Philip Hofer, Houghton now owns the best collection of David’s work assembled in one place. The calligraphy, cartoons, and drawings accompanying these essays give a sense of his genius. Here and in other venues, he will continue to be shown, and his reputation will increase. Those of us who knew him, and the many whom he uplifted and delighted, remember David C. K. McClelland with love.