



Image from robertbalmanno.com

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Robert Balmanno: A Tribute

Robert Balmanno—“Bob” to his many friends—was a novelist and storyteller and book promoter par excellence, a lapsed Catholic, an economic leftist, a labor advocate, a union organizer, a lover of books, a professional librarian, a historian manqué, a graduate student in Scotland, where his family had its roots, and an inquisitive traveler from the Isle of Iona to the darker corners of East Germany. He was a Peace Corps volunteer and a bull wrestler in West Africa, a quasi-Luddite and IT technology skeptic living in the heart of the technology capital of the world, a talker, a dreamer, a hiker, a writer, an idealistic realist and a realistic idealist, a loving uncle, brother, son, a secular monk and a shy romantic, and always a loyal friend. All in all, Bob was one of the most sheerly dynamic personalities it has been my privilege to know.

In the fall of 2025, this dynamo, bursting with energy for 74 years, suddenly, after a years-long fight against cancer and kidney failure, went silent. And I lost one of my best friends and *Caveat Lector* one of its kindest supporters and most successful contributors. (Bob never thought of

himself as a poet, yet he wrote a poem we felt distinctly privileged to publish a number of years ago. All four volumes of his much-beloved series, *The Blessings of Gaia*, were published as “*Caveat Lector Books*.”)

Our friendship spanned decades and was based on a shared fascination with the world’s profoundly disillusioning politics after the failed hopes of the 1960s, and with history over the longest of time periods (we were both deeply influenced by Kenneth Clark’s celebrated television series *Civilization* and the legend of the Irish monks who helped keep its memory alive through the darkest of ages). We were both obsessed by the wicked problem of modernity, the paradoxes of liberalism and the triumph and brutality of capitalism, while at the same time we were buoyed by a faith in the power of writing, from the Bible to George Orwell, to express, to expose, and to change—though just how it did so and what it changed were questions to which we both had often conflicting answers.

For example, Bob was often puzzled by my speculative formalism and attempts to stretch the limits of the speakable, my deliberate creation of difficulty and even inaccessibility, seemingly for their own sakes. He found my novel *A Spy in the Ruins* baffling, though he generously ended the final volume of *The Blessings of Gaia*, *Auger’s Touchstone*, with my poem “The Invention of Fire.” On my side, I sometimes found his writing philosophically naïve and in need of a demanding editor. He thought I often made things too hard, and I felt he sometimes made things too easy.

Bob was not always persuaded by my insistence on art as a self-sufficient good—an escape from a world of evils, some mitigable and thus opportunities for genuine improvements of the human condition, but others, including mortality, finitude, and humanity’s unconquerable selfishness, irredeemable and therefore only escapable in contemplation and fantasy, such as myth, religion, the richest source of contemplation, which is philosophy, and the richest source of fantasy, the arts. For Bob, the value of art was essentially social and by implication political—a weapon in the war against social and political evils and a tool to create a better world. For me, it is an alternative to the world—one of the vanishingly few ways to fulfill the needs of the human soul for justice and beauty and truth in a world ruled by quanta, relativity, selfishness, and chance.

My ultimately pessimistic cultural elitism often clashed with his essentially optimistic populism. What we did agree on was the central importance of writing, of literature and the arts, in any society worth living in. And we were both equally alarmed by the forces undermining modern culture, from neoliberalism to reckless technological innovation to the collapse of the American educational system in our lifetime, which was creating a society that has turned ignorance into a weapon and stupidity into a philosophy.

Despite our differences, our friendship was strongly reinforced by an economic leftism informed by a Marxist analysis of capitalism that has recently been gaining traction in this country. That the turn against capitalism has been deepening and strengthening was one of the few signs of hope we both saw in the decade of Trumpism.

We were both, politically, what one might call aggressive social democrats in a time when calling oneself a “liberal” was either hated by the right or despised by the left. We were also appalled that the only viable left-leaning political party in the United States had long ago traded in the fight for economic justice for a suicidal cocktail of neoliberalism and identity politics that reinforced the neoliberal takeover of the country and led (in the judgment of many, including the two of us), first to the bloody follies of the George W. Bush administration and then to the horrors of Donald Trump and what one must, unhappily, call the neofascism of the modern Republican Party.

We both saw few politically viable solutions to this crisis, though we were more cynical than many about its cause. I hammered away at the idea that we have never been a “democracy,” that our insistence on calling ourselves that was merely one of the more damning examples of what I believe is the self-deception that lies at the heart of the “American experiment”; that we were, and always had been, a plutocracy, an idea Bob seemed to accept with some reluctance, partly because it seemed so despairing. I often voiced a belief (which appalled me, but which Bob sometimes also reluctantly agreed to, going uncharacteristically silent as the implications sank in) that the only way to shake the chokehold of the cabal of the corporations and the super-wealthy, the so-called “oligarchy,” would be an economic collapse, another great depression, and the wide-spread violence of either war or revolution, with the immense suffering of the innocent that either of these would inevitably entail.

We spent many hours on the phone or visiting, either in San Francisco or south on the Peninsula, in wide-ranging talk, debating over long lunches or hiking the streets in full voice, causing bystanders to stare at us thinking we were fighting when we were just shouting thoughts at each other, Bob volleying joyful curses, myself a little, but only a little, less noisy but no less enthusiastic—although I must admit I sometimes was shouting just so I could get a word into the conversation, Bob being a master of the hours-long monologue if you didn’t yell in your own ideas.

Another of our shared obsessions was “global warming” and the environmental tragedy humanity has been creating since the second world war out of greed, arrogance, and self-deceit—the post-Enlightenment crime of what I now call “human supremacy.” This is a phrase I never had the chance to try out on Bob, though one I have a strong feeling he would have embraced, not without accusing me (and he would have been not far wrong) of misanthropy. Environmental

catastrophe and its enormous social and political consequences would become the central subject of *The Blessings of Gaia*.

Bob would often bounce off his friends ideas for his books, and I remember clearly the first ideas of his epic take on our grim future that he began discussing with me, with growing enthusiasm, a quarter century ago, just as he was drafting its first volume, *September Snow*. (It is worth noting that he was working on this book while, at the same time, successfully organizing a union and negotiating very generous labor contracts for part-time workers in the library system where he worked—an astonishing feat in that union-hating time, and one for which he received much-deserved recognition by the national labor leaders of those years.)

Our conversations were like getting glimpses into Bob's laboratory of ideas as he tried out this conception and that as his monumental literary project grew over the decades. In the *Gaia* novels, Bob was able to combine some of his strongest passions—history and its philosophy (Bob used the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico's cyclical theory of history as the series' philosophical basis), literature, politics, his peculiarly winning form of feminism, and the likely devastating outcomes caused by the climate crisis—in what amounts to a virtual history of world over the next 2500 years.

That he was able to complete his task was a source of enormous pride and satisfaction for Bob. He had done what he set out to do—his life was a success in, perhaps, the only sense that is ultimately meaningful: a success on his own terms. And there was a very positive response from the public; that is, from actual lovers of books, if not from the brew of “publishing professionals” who have no time, in this country, for the nonconforming, especially if they are left of dead center. It is hardly news that defiant leftists are nonpersons in a country that insists on calling itself “free,” with its so-called “free market” of privatized authoritarianism and soft fascisms, where wage slaves have the “freedom” to choose their masters—and even if said leftists are able to sell, by hand, in the “free market,” six thousand copies of their books to enthusiastic readers, as Bob, semi-miraculously, was able to do.

There is more, much more, to remember and share (the tree that collapsed just behind him as he passed it on one of his daily marathon walks, just missing him by inches; our debates on the frustrations of modern dating and the perpetual war between the sexes; his stay in a hospital when he almost died from kidney failure and I played for him, over the phone, one of his favorite pieces of music, Vaughan Williams' *Fantasy on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*), but I will leave this brief tribute with these heart-felt words and verses written in the days after I learned of Bob's passing: Rest in peace, Bob Balmanno—fighter, writer, generous soul and truly noble spirit, champion of the exploited, loyal friend—a friend, an ally, a man. We need more like you, both now and as long as we hope to survive. If we are luckier than we have any right to expect, we

shall have them.

The Roarer, Still

The cheerful, swearing roarer
has smiled the last time
his broad, brave smile;
bid farewell
with his bearish wave,
bragged over a cap,
sunned himself in his innocent vanity,
told one more story
about Edinburgh, East Germany,
Iona, Mali,
wrestling bulls, union negotiators,
ghosts of Irish monks,
recalcitrant agents
and predatory managers
till he slyly turned
their very strengths
into weakness
and conquered them.
He made his final conquest
against mortality.
The dynamo is still.
Yet it is not certain mortality has, finally, conquered.

Christopher Bernard is a co-editor and founder of *Caveat Lector*.