

M

any boys dream at night of statues of themselves being raised in public places. A bronze *tableau vivant* in which they are the hero, frozen forever in some casually noble act. But behind the wind-rattled canvas blinds of the Manifold dormitory in post-war Corio, you can be sure John Landy wasn't one of the boys who conjured that silly, melodramatic dream. His night thoughts were of a far humbler hue, populated by beetles and butterflies.

And yet there is now a statue. A *tableaux* of a moment that in the second half of the twentieth century became one of Australia's essential stories, a tale every boy was told, along with Gallipoli and Bodyline. Of a champion, who gave up the race to help his great rival, and then, even better, went on to win the race. This man was someone whom all fathers wanted their son to be.

John is bemused, troubled and embarrassed by the story's sacred status. He winces at its mention. He feels it is wrong to sum up a life with an unthinking moment. And it would be if that moment of grace were not representative of its protagonist.

John Landy fell by chance onto the stage where one of humanity's last great competitive explorations was being played out. Like the race for the poles, great national pride was on the line in the hunt for the four-minute mile, sought in the post-war period as much as Everest's summit and the moon.

As with Everest, people had come tantalisingly close. But no one had got there. There was a widely held belief it was beyond human capability. It wasn't meant to be.

At Olympic Park in 1952 John, aged twenty-two, ran within a second of the world record and was another second off the Holy Grail of the four-minute mile. Columnist Arthur Daley wrote an article in *The New York Times* headed 'Pass The Salt Please', an American way of saying you don't believe what you're being told. A month later John ran an almost identical time and the world believed.

He caught the public imagination. A crowd of 10,000 came to see him in Perth in 1953, and upwards of 20,000 at Olympic Park early in 1954. John ran five more 4:02s, but it was his English rival Roger Bannister, running in strictly controlled conditions in Oxford in May 1954, who at last broke four minutes. John did it six weeks later, in Finland, breaking Bannister's world record.

The pursuit of the four-minute mile made him a worldwide star. Businessmen flew from New York to watch him run in Vancouver in case he broke four minutes and they might be witnesses at an epochal

event. People all over the world followed his races, made judgements on his strengths and shortcomings. Len Johnson, in his book *The Landy Era*, writes,

When he struggled with an Achilles tendon injury shortly before the Melbourne Games, an overwhelming flood of letters advising treatments and cures poured into his family's letterbox from all around Australia and overseas.

John Landy had entered the realm of Bradman.

He was not much of a runner at school, by his own admission. He was only runner-up at the Under-16 Athletics Championships in 1945, but had managed to rouse himself to win the Open Athletics Championship by 1948. He preferred football and enjoyed Manifold's dominance as a sporting House, a House of which he was captain in 1948.

He remembers the School as large, bare and wintry. 'There were wonderful people. It was a happy time.' And he remembers, at the end of the war in Europe and then Japan, the spontaneous celebrations that were had on the main oval.

John was a lepidopterist and coleopterist from birth and can describe individual beetles he saw at age four. He enjoyed hunting them and discovering their history. Their study taught him of the interconnectedness of all life and undermined the primacy of human existence. When he confesses to having no spiritual side, one recalls how the multiplicity of beetle species also made God come off as something of a frivolous tinkerer to Darwin. Why so many beetles, Lord?

When asked to serve as governor of Victoria by then premier Steve Bracks, his first, typically self-effacing, reaction was to refuse. He agreed because he felt this was adhering to JR Darling's philosophy that we all owe something to our country and the world. He had five wonderful years and afterwards was very glad he did it.

And this, he says, is the greatest gift running gave him: through life it enabled him to do many things he wouldn't otherwise have done.

It is a vanity that comes on in middle age, the belief that the young are not made of the same fine stuff as the old. One should be suspicious of it. But speaking to John Landy one can't help but fear some rare evolutionary distillation of grace might ebb from the world with his passing.

The statue, titled 'Sportsmanship', stands at Olympic Park. Linger alongside it and you can hear parents explain it to their children, and hear the solemnity in their telling as they try to get the essence of the story across. It's not an easy story. Even its protagonist refuses to believe it.



JOHN MICHAEL LANDY

AC CVO MBE

(1930-)

M'48

Olympic athlete

World record holder

Naturalist

Governor of Victoria