

Bruce Bennett – Colleague and Scholar

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Bruce was a good man and a good friend. I had the pleasure and privilege of working with him for many years at the UNSW campus at the Australian Defence Force Academy. That experience together with my reading of his scholarly work forms the basis of this short essay about Bruce as Colleague and Scholar.

I'd like to begin with an anecdote. Soon after Bruce arrived to take up the chair at UNSW@ADFA, I was involved in a Grand Final soccer match. There wasn't much grand about it— State League Division 4, I think. Anyway, Bruce came to watch and after he'd seen us beaten, he was on the touch line with Claire, my wife, and our kids, Ellen and Damian. In my clumsy way, no doubt wanting to alert the children to be on their best behaviour, I introduced Bruce to them as 'my boss from work'. Bruce immediately riposted, 'Not his boss, his colleague.' The firmness with which this was said is the measure of the man and forms a neat introduction to his leadership style.

Bruce wasn't interested in the role of the God-professor, which I've no doubt he felt was out-moded, inappropriate and anti-democratic. Rather he wished to lead by example, by discussion and through negotiation. He liked to work co-operatively at every level. Team-teaching was encouraged, joint research projects fostered and management decisions the result of extensive consultation and where appropriate, committee work. If not all members of the department were always amenable to this style, it says more about them than it does about Bruce. And, it should be said, whatever opposition he encountered, Bruce always tried to encourage colleagues in all aspects of their work. He did not harbour grudges or play favourites. In the seventeen years I worked with him, I never heard him raise his voice in anger once. He wasn't inclined to be combative. He remained a calm and steady presence under the various pressures that were brought to bear upon the department with monotonous regularity from both the military and the University.

Like my other colleagues, I was the beneficiary of Bruce's help and encouragement. I particularly appreciated the way this was delivered. There was never any question of Bruce saying 'I think you should', or 'you must' or even 'I think it would be advisable'. Rather he would listen to what you were planning and then offer helpful advice and/or encouragement. When I decided to shift the focus of my writing from the strictly academic to a more experimental genre, there was no attempt to persuade me otherwise. Similarly, when I was disinclined to take over the headship of the department, though I

think my decision disappointed him, Bruce did not put me under pressure to change my mind. For this, and much more I'm very grateful.

But I want to spend the rest of the time available to me in saying something about Bruce's written scholarly work, which I think shares many of the virtues he displayed as a leader and colleague. Re-reading the thirty-eight essays, in his two collections, *An Australian Compass* and *Homing In*, thinking again of his books about Peter Porter and the Australian Short story, contemplating his contributions to the Penguin Literary History of Australia and the Oxford Literary History of Australia, reading for the first time his latest book, *The Spying Game: An Australian Angle*, I'm struck not only by the remarkable unity of purpose driving the work but also by its very distinctive (and distinguished) manner. The tone of Bruce's work is contemplative; he isn't interested in tendentious polemic or assertive argument. His is the art of meditation leading towards gentle persuasion. There is nothing loud or hectoring about his work and nothing remotely self-congratulatory. In my obituary and eulogy for Bruce, I remarked that he was in some ways the least *critical* of literary critics in the sense that he wasn't interested in easy judgements, literary league tables or wielding literary battle-axes. This does not, however, mean he lacked discernment. I was amused, for instance, in an essay about Clive James, by Bruce's comparison of that writer with Gore Vidal. Bruce writes, 'That he [Vidal] is far more politically savvy than Clive James is not to James's detriment: few could match Vidal's political knowledge and insight.'¹ There are other such telling judgements scattered through the prose, in which the writer in question is both judged and simultaneously forgiven or understood. This is criticism at its kindest.

Obviously in the short space at my disposal here, I can't hope to do justice to the massive body of Bruce's work, which includes at least twenty-eight books edited, or sole authored and a further 150 articles essays and reports. But what I would like to do is suggest something of the contours of the work - its historical breadth and geographical reach - and what I take to be the remarkable unity of theme and purpose that may be discerned in the work. For although Bruce wrote about aspects of Australian Literature from the earliest convict writings to the most contemporary spy novels and extended his interests to writers from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Fiji and India, not to mention various European and North American authors, there is, I think, through all the work a fascination with the personal and political implications of literary representations of place and space.

In more than one essay, Bruce recalls with nicely poised irony the way as an undergraduate he wrote his honours thesis in the library at the University of Western Australia, alternating that endeavour with other less academic pursuits: 'The thesis topic I chose was "Images of the City in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot and Baudelaire". In the mornings, I taught life-saving classes on the Swan River and saw the world through sun-glasses across a zinc-creamed nose. In the afternoons and evenings I was able to indulge in dreams of foggy London and Paris. In t-shirt and thongs, I identified with Baudelaire's *flâneur* chasing the phantasms of fallen women through Paris's gas-lit boulevards. I was a mind traveller.'²

¹ 'Clive James: Humour and Empire', *Homing In*, p.83.

² 'A West-Side Story', *Homing In*, pp.220-1

The recognition of literature's ability to make mind travellers of us all and to aid in the difficult process of cross-cultural exchange and understanding is central to Bruce's work. That this recognition proceeded from biographical experience seems clear. In the same essay, I've just quoted, Bruce goes on to record travelling to England for the first time on a Rhodes scholarship and the fact that while he was in England he first began to discover the literature of his own country and his own state. Much of the rest of his life's work was engaged in teasing out the full dimensions of this paradox: that while he was at home he wanted to imagine away; and when he was away he was led to imagine home. When he returned from Oxford and took up a post at UWA, Bruce devoted a considerable amount of time to the study and promotion of Western Australian writers and writing. He had at this time he says, 'a strong sense of home in a conventional sense, as house and family, and more broadly as Western Australia or 'The West'³ but he tellingly notes that he was also interested in 'imaginative expansion' which took him away from the familiar: 'In retrospect,' he writes, 'I was looking for unsettling experience as much as a settled sense of identity. I became fascinated with an anticipatory – or almost already experienced – sense of expatriotism and exile; and it is a theme which I still find compelling.'⁴

In his critical biography of Peter Porter, *Spirit in Exile*, we find Bruce teasing out the ramifications of Porter's ambivalent attitude to ideas of home and exile and although he doesn't always agree with Porter's views, there is evidently a strongly empathetic relationship between the poet and his biographer.

As many reading this will be aware, Bruce widened the scope of his interest from West Australian writing to Australian Literature more generally and from there to the literatures of what he sometimes designates the Indo-Asia-Pacific. In this latter work, Bruce adopted the role of a literary diplomat interested at once to introduce Australian writing and culture to our neighbours and to further our understanding of their politics and culture through an analysis and appreciation of the new literatures written in English in South East Asia, India and the South Pacific. It comes as no surprise to learn that after arriving back from his Rhodes scholarship in England, Bruce was interviewed and accepted for a job in the department of external affairs.⁵ Though he chose a university career instead, politics and diplomacy remained of great interest to him through out his career and, of course, that interest culminated in his most recent book, *The Spying Game: An Australian Angle*, which he completed in February of this year.

In all his work with its expanding focus from regional to national to international literatures, Bruce tests the power of literature to provide insights and make connections between people and cultures. Though he was aware of critical theory, he was intellectually and temperamentally sceptical towards totalising ideas and grand designs. His prose is clear, concise and elegant, uncluttered by jargon or pretentious neologism. His aim is to communicate with as wide an audience as possible. He is less interested in what literature might mean in theory as to what role it might play, both personally and politically, in practice.

³ 'Home and Away: Reconciling the Local and the Global', *Homing In*, p.137

⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.136

Towards the conclusion of one of his richest essays entitled, *Home and Away: Reconciling the Local and Global*, Bruce refers to Benjamin Barber's book, *Jihad vs McWorld*. In his refusal of the binary offered by Barber's title, Bruce shows himself to be thoroughly aware of the legacy of deconstruction and in his deployment and advocacy of hybridity he owes a debt to post-colonial theory. But the way in which the argument is couched is all Bennett: 'Clearly,' he writes, 'there is a need for hybrid versions of these too stark alternatives, including a kind of international regionalism which incorporates the benefits of global communications with those of primary identification with a place, region and community. There should be room in this dynamic too, for an 'enlightened nationalism' . . . A little later, he goes on, 'In this new cultural dynamic which we, in Australia as in India and elsewhere, are working out in our different ways, literature may play a substantial but not a dominant role.'⁶

Both the subtle navigation between antinomies and the qualification here is typical of Bruce's careful avoidance of grandiose claims; his desire to maintain perspective, his interest in what can be legitimately claimed for literature. There is in such essays and in a great deal of Bruce's writing a refreshing tendency towards the multi-disciplinary. He is interested in the way a study of literature might usefully combine with other disciplines, history, geography, political science to provide new insights. His invocation of David Suzuki's injunction to 'think globally and act locally' is not only an example of cross-disciplinary thinking but also an indicator of another original strand that runs through much of Bruce's work: an interest in Green politics and ideas. I think here, in particular, of his very fine essay on Judith Wright entitled: *An Ecological Vision*⁷ and his inaugural professorial public lecture delivered at UNSW@ADFA in 1993 when he likened literary critics to the Green movement in their desire to conserve the best of the past, while wishing to change the future for the better.

Bruce's latest book, *The Spying Game: An Australian Angle* has the same multi-disciplinary approach and brings together various of his previous interests. It is, after all, perhaps only a small step from the imaginary *flaneur* to the imaginary spy. The interest in politics, diplomacy, national and international allegiances are all foregrounded as are tensions between private and public life and problems of selfhood in relation to place and politics. Bruce explains the fact that several of his students at ADFA were destined for careers in Military Intelligence also sparked his interest in this subject matter. There was a typically practical dimension to researching the part imaginative literature might have to play in understanding the spying game. The final paragraph of the book is telling and, it seems to me, points us towards the importance of Bruce's work:

'Without detriment to their core mission in the humanities, it seems to me that literary studies can give richness and depth to a range of trans-disciplinary fields that include International Relations, Terrorism History and Cross-Cultural Studies. The study of literature can build bridges of understanding into foreign territory. Hearts and minds tire quickly of propaganda and seek richer imaginative fare. Literature can thus properly be enlisted to fight terror with the 'soft weapons' of words and ideas.'

⁶ Ibid. p.144

⁷ An Australian Compass, pp. 149-175

Bruce's work, I'd like to suggest, was dedicated to building those bridges of understanding between people and cultures. The number of tributes to Bruce I know Trish received from all over the world suggests his success in this endeavour on a personal level. In his writing, he has left a rich and lasting legacy. In touching upon matters autobiographical in his essay 'Home and Away', Bruce remarks with typical modesty that he is 'not by any means an extraordinary Australian.'⁸ I beg to differ. We might be beguiled by his self-description in the same essay as 'a local boy who likes to travel'⁹ but we should not, I think, ignore the fact that he was an extraordinary Australian who made and will continue to make through his writing an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of the literature of Australia and the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

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⁸ 'Home and Away', *Homing In*, p.135

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 137