

Bruce Bennett: An Appreciation

Anne Holden Rønning
President EASA 2001-2005

Copyright © Anne Holden Rønning 2012 This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged

With his characteristic and warm smile Bruce was nearly always part of the Australian contingent attending EASA (European Association for Studies on Australia) conferences, most recently at Palma in 2009. He was a kind man sharing his knowledge and encouraging other scholars, especially younger ones.

I should like to pay tribute to him by some words on *Australian Short Fiction: A History*, one of the many scholarly works written by Bruce, yet one that to the best of my knowledge is unique. He illustrates the breadth of short fiction in Australia using an encyclopaedic approach and introducing us to many writers, some little known, some forgotten, some well-known. Referring to Christina Stead's oceans of story Bruce writes that he wants to give us a few dips into those oceans. The pure beauty of his language in describing his purpose is also indicative of Bruce himself:

In the swirling seas of contemporary storytelling it is the literary historian's task to restore some meaning and context to those small imprints in the kerosene shale. [...] The stories of a culture can be thought of also in a popular image of bottles washed up on a shore. (2002: 1)

This is a seminal work, not least for us Europeans, giving us the opportunity to get a broad overview of Australian short fiction, for, as he writes, "the literary historian is a beachcomber, a bottle opener, a translator" (1). As a beachcomber he has provided fascinating reading not least because Bruce writes in a manner that whets the ordinary reader's interest, followed by more detailed comment on some stories. For me another important feature of this book is the inclusion of so many women writers, from the "Unquiet Spirits" of 1825 – 1880, such as the moralistic tales for the bush by Mary Theresa Vidal, and Ellen Augusta Clacy's tales and novellas about the goldfields. We are introduced to Mary Fortune the first Australian woman detective writer, and the alternative tradition of women's writing between 1880-1930: women who did not write of the bush and mateship, but, more in line with their sisters in England and America, on social issues and aspects of emancipation at all levels, as we see in the work of Catherine Helen Spence. Bruce gives us an excellent introduction to all these women writers, most of whom are forgotten and unavailable today. And so the text continues through the contending forces of realism and romance to modernism and urban realism

in twentieth century writing. Thank you, Bruce, for helping us to get to know all these writers male and female.

As a former President of EASA it is a great pleasure to contribute a little to this edition of *Coolabah* in memory of Bruce Bennett. I first met Bruce through EASA. His kindness on my first research trip Australia researching Christina Stead in Canberra, and on later occasions, will always be remembered. It was a pleasure to know him.

Anne Holden Rønning is Associate Professor Emerita at the University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interests and fields of publication are Women's Studies, and postcolonial literatures and cultures, especially from Australia and New Zealand. She was co-editor of *Identities and Masks :Colonial and Postcolonial Studies* (2001); and *Readings of the Particular: The Postcolonial in the Postnational* (2007); and author of *"For Was I not Born Here?" Identity and Culture in the Work of Yvonne du Fresne* (2010). In 2012 she was visiting professor at the University of Barcelona and gave a Masters course on Cultural identities