

## *Travelling with Veronica*

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**Abstract:** I met Veronica in 1988 on my first trip to Australia. I had admired her as an academic since my undergraduate days but had no idea what was in store for me once I met her. Over the decades we met in places across the world and in Spain and each meeting was unique, an intellectual uplift and more than often an absolute hoot when we travelled together.

In paying tribute to Veronica I would like to write about some of the incredible and on one occasion hair-raising, trips we shared.

**Key Words:** Veronica Brady; Shirley Walker; Julian Croft; ASAL; EASA; EACLALS

I first met Veronica in Launceston, Tasmania in 1988. I had seen her before at an EACLALS<sup>i</sup> conference and heard her give a magnificent paper. I knew her reputation as a scholar, lecturer and human being. That preceded my first meeting with her in Australia.

I was in Launceston at an ASAL<sup>ii</sup> conference as part of an assimilation tour funded by ASAL and the Australian department of Foreign Affairs. The funding for that trip came as a wonderful surprise to me thanks to two people; Shirley Walker and Julian Croft. Julian had visited Barcelona some time before giving a lecture in my poetry class.

During his stay we talked about whether I would perhaps one day teach some aspect of Australian Studies given that my PhD was the first in Spain on Australian Literature. I also was privileged in getting to know his own wonderful work as a poet. On his return to Australia, he and Shirley were talking about whom to ask as a European guest for the 1988 ASAL conference and Julian mentioned my name to Shirley. The day Shirley's letter arrived notifying me of the chance to go to Australia for a month was to change the route of my academic life until today. I distinctly remember ringing Shirley to accept the invitation and to thank her, ASAL and DFAT.

So I found myself at Sydney airport waiting at the airport gate to catch the plane for Launceston. I had arrived very early on my first long haul flight feeling excited, wondering what the next four weeks would bring me. I sat and began to write in my diary. Suddenly, I heard a bunch of people arrive in the lounge, obviously, all friends and colleagues and I guessed that they were all ASAL delegates. Shirley Walker, with her innate intuition, picked me out from the now crowded lounge with her warm smile and welcoming voice she said “You have to be Susan”. Among the group travelling with Shirley there were only two faces I recognized: Julian Croft and Veronica.

The conference began the next day and at breakfast I found a quiet spot where I could sit and observe the people and space around me. I looked out at the sun beginning to clear clouds and admired the beautiful landscape. Suddenly a voice said “Good morning Susan, we have met, you know”. It was Veronica Brady. In her characteristic way she had detected that I might be either jet lagged, out of my mind or feeling somewhat lost. This was the prologue to a series of conversations we had during the conference. She was curious, as only Veronica could be, about who I was, where I came from, my relationship with Australia and where I thought my post-doctoral road might lead me. Veronica was renowned, like Shirley, for her mentoring of young people, indeed of everybody who needed help. On the conference coach trip, which included a visit to a stunningly beautiful vineyard, she encouraged me to spend the next month not only investigating the richness of Australian Studies but also to try and get a handle on the complex multiculturalism of the country through its cuisine: “My dear, you have wonderful wines in Spain. I love Rioja but you must try our wines, a good contrast you know”. Veronica was always able to open up a world of knowledge from the academic to daily life.

Over the coming decades I came to know, admire and care very deeply for Veronica. We did not necessarily agree on things, but that was one of Veronica’s strengths. One could disagree with her, have a long and profound discussion about the subject in hand but one was never made to feel that she was in any way attacking or attempting to undermine one.

My next meeting with Veronica was again in Australia at an ASAL conference. The tradition in these conferences was that at the conference dinner there was a dancing competition and prizes were distributed. Once the competitors left the floor, dancing continued. To my amazement, Veronica who was sitting opposite me, suddenly stood up, grabbed somebody’s walking stick and danced away across the floor. I really should not have been surprised, after all, Veronica was a bicycle-riding, Roman Catholic, Communist nun! That said everything about her.

Our next meetings were in Australia, where I returned every year, and across Europe. It was then that I occasionally undertook travelling with Veronica. It was always a challenge either intellectually, physically or both, as Veronica seemed to have the energy of ten people rolled into one. After a conference in Brisbane, she boarded the flight into Sydney before me. As I came down the aisle she suddenly shot out in front of me “Where is your seat my dear?” I told her. She took my boarding pass, gave me hers saying “You should sit here with Tom”. Before I could utter a word, she sprinted towards my seat at the back of the plane. And that is how I came to sit beside Tom Keneally, whose work I was using in class. Stunned into silence, I need not have worried. Tom has to be one of the greatest raconteurs in the world. I spent most of the flight in laughter. On disembarking, I waited to say goodbye to Veronica who, with a wide grin, said “I thought you’d enjoy that”. We hugged each other and went our different ways.

Veronica was a frequent visitor to Spain. Like Shirley Walker, she had developed strong relationships with both Doireann MacDermott and the staff and students at Barcelona University, as well as with Maria Socorro Suárez, Isabel Carrera and other staff and students at Oviedo University.

On one occasion she arrived in Barcelona one evening after a very long train trip from somewhere in Europe. I went to meet her at the station, convinced that she would be very tired and only want a snack and an early night, but I offered dinner. She accepted the invitation with delight. We spent the next two and a half hours laughing, chatting, talking earnestly and demolishing a bottle of Rioja between us. Next morning, she gave a great lecture to the students, showing no signs of travel fatigue or having had such a late night.

The next time she came to Barcelona she was with Bruce Bennett. I had arranged for us all to have dinner at home with Doireann MacDermott as we were to leave on the early morning train for Oviedo. All went well until Doireann and I went into the kitchen to make coffee. There was the most amazing explosion from the cooker. The coffee maker had blown itself up. Before I could react, Veronica and Bruce had grabbed towels and were cleaning the walls, door, and windows! The memory of this incident caused frequent laughter during the long train trip to Oviedo.

The last time I saw Veronica was at the EASA<sup>iii</sup> conference in Debrecen 2005. It was a wonderful conference in a beautiful location. Veronica and I were to take a return train from Debrecen to Budapest. When we arrived at the station the departure showed Debrecen – Budapest, Platform 4. However, there was no sign of a train. So, ten minutes before departure, Veronica went to the ticket office and they confirmed platform 4. Eventually the train arrived and we settled into our seats, Veronica was about four rows ahead of me. The inevitable ticket inspector came into the carriage and Veronica showed her ticket. She stood up very suddenly, turned towards me and came down the aisle looking very shaken. “This train” she said “is going to Rumania”. The inspector had by now reached me and obviously realized that he had two foreign “ladies in distress”. We tried all the languages we knew between us to tell the inspector what was wrong. He only had Hungarian. However, he sat with us and through sign language we began to communicate. He indicated that we should get off at the next station “and ....”, said Veronica raising her eyebrows, shoulders and holding her palms upwards to indicate we needed further instructions. The inspector by now had rescued some English. “Next stop off” and disappeared leaving both of us in a state of certain distress. Veronica and I discussed what to do. I had to fly out of Budapest in the early evening and Veronica had to catch an overnight train to Vienna. Given the circumstances we decided we would not get off the train, but go through to Rumania and sort ourselves out there. We could both imagine ourselves standing on a platform somewhere between Debrecen and Bucharest. It was a daunting thought. At this juncture the inspector came back and indicated, drawing a vehicle and a station platform, that there would be a car to meet us at the next station. Our only thought was how much would it cost, and would we get to Budapest in time for our connections. However, we had no choice, so we got off at the next station together with the inspector, who walked us through a very small station to the street where a black saloon car awaited us. He introduced the driver to us and ran back to his train.

It was obvious that this was not a taxi but a private car as no taximeter could be seen. All our luggage would not fit into the boot and the front seat was occupied by another passenger, so Veronica and I squeezed into the back seat with my suitcase dangerously poised vertically between us. We could not see each other but talked through the case

with our hands gesticulating over the top of it. Veronica was very worried as she did not have much change in Forints or Euros on her. I told her not to worry as I had enough. Immediately a book appeared over the top of the case: "That is for you my dear and you will tell me when you get home how much I owe you". We indicated to the driver the time that we should be in Budapest. As we entered a motorway we found ourselves engaged in a Formula 1 race. The driver, with one hand out of the window, drove at a terrifying speed in the fast lane, blasting his horn at anything that got in his way. Veronica and I decided that the best way to avoid being scared out of our wits was to concentrate on conversation and not look ahead. We finally reached Budapest airport thirty minutes before take-off. As I was going to give Veronica a hug she commanded "No time for hugs my dear ... RUN". And run I did.

Sadly, that was the last time I saw Veronica. I heard from her from time to time by letter—she was of the old school—and occasionally by email. When I heard of her death I was deeply shocked, like so many people around the world. Nonetheless, whenever I remember Veronica I cannot help smiling when remembering our last goodbye in Budapest.

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<sup>i</sup> European Association for Commonwealth Languages and Literature

<sup>ii</sup> Association for the Study of Australian Literature

<sup>iii</sup> European Association for Studies of Australia

### **Bio Note:**

Sue Ballyn is Prof. Emerita at Barcelona University. She is the founder and Co-Director of the Australian Studies Centre at the University which is fully recognized by the former as an Observatory. Her area of main research over the last twenty years has been and is the reconstruction of female convict biographies, the study and transcription of surgeons' journals on female transports and work on convicts of non-British origin. She is a member of the Female Convicts Research Centre in Hobart, Tasmania. She is also a member of a project on Postcolonial Crime Fiction and another project on ageing.