

A Marvelous Man

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Abstract: An account of Geoff Davis's enormous contribution to African Studies

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I have been asked to speak about Geoff Davis's contribution to African Studies. You will forgive me if before speaking of that I speak briefly as I am sure others will have done about Geoff, the friend I knew and loved. As is so often the case with your oldest friends and as you yourself age I cannot recall when I first met Geoff or even where. He seems always to have been there, at conferences and in recent years on visits to Australia when he or sometimes he and his beloved Ingrid stayed with us. That was where I last saw him. But before that we met in South Africa where we were both at the ACLALS Conference in Stellenbosch. Before that conference my wife and I travelled together with Geoff and Ingrid, Ben and Judy Lindfors and Russ McDougall through South Africa for a month, from Kwazulu-Natal through Grahamstown and through the Eastern and Western Cape. Four weeks in a small people mover. No tougher test of friendship and a test that Geoff passed with flying colours. He was the warmest and most engaging travelling companion anyone could have desired.

Geoff and I were of an age, both born in 1943 a stone's throw apart, he in Birmingham and I in South Wales. Geoff was brought up in Liverpool and he often used to say that with the surname Davis and brought up in what is often thought of as the capital of North Wales he was an honorary Welshman. Anyone who remembers Geoff's lovely Liverpoolian lilt, which he retained even when speaking German, will have a chuckle at that. He was my friend and I mourn his passing too early.

But to his role in African Studies. From virtually its foundation in 1957 until 1999 Geoff was a mainstay and co-editor of what remains one of the most important periodicals in African Studies, "Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society". Geoff's co-edited 1988 book "Towards Liberation: Culture and Resistance in South Africa" was published as a special issue of that journal. But in the more than 30 volumes of the journal in which Geoff was involved a truly unrivalled body of work on Africa was charted under his

guidance. When you add in the fact that he was also co-editing the amazing Cross-Cultures series during much of this time one is amazed at his energy and his work ethic. Only the passion of true commitment can explain it.

In addition to this amazing editorial work, Geoff wrote, edited and co-edited some 20 books. Of these 9 were on aspects of African literature and culture. Despite this I remember Geoff and I agreeing that we neither liked the term Africanist, Geoff commenting that it was akin to those early anthropologists who seemed patronizingly to co-opt those they studied as in the titles "My People of..." etc. For Geoff his commitment to Southern African studies was part of his broader engagement with the role of culture and literature in the self-realization and liberation of people everywhere who had suffered discrimination and dispossession. From 1983 when he co-authored the aptly entitled book "South Africa: the Privileged and the Dispossessed" until the 2003 book "Voices of Justice and Reason. Apartheid and Beyond in South African Literature" Geoff maintained a passionate scrutiny of the changes and developments in Southern Africa.

Two other main strands of Geoff's work on Southern Africa deserve mention. The first was his keen interest in theatre both as academic critic and as passionate audience member. I can still recall the wonderful time we had seeing plays together at the Festival in Grahamstown during our last African trip. The 1996 book "Theatre and Change in South Africa" charted the way South African drama has moved through and beyond the oppositional model of the apartheid era into an exploration of the complex issues posed in the period since its overthrow. In 1997 the collection of the plays of the artist and playwright Matsemela Manaka, edited by Manaka and by Geoff displays this project too as its title "Beyond the Echoes of Soweto" suggests. It reflects the work of Manaka from its start in the 1976 Soweto Rising to the post-apartheid period and chronicles the shifts that occurred during the lifetime of this remarkable South African playwright.

The second main strand of Geoff's African work is the amazing and exhaustive work he did as a bibliographer and encyclopaedist as the compiler of the updated volume on South Africa in the World Bibliographical Series that came out in 1994. This monumental task occupied Geoff for several years and involved scrutinizing and evaluating almost 2000 volumes. As Geoff, with characteristic modesty, said to me at the time, "somebody's got to do it."

The last of his books on Africa in 2006 was the co-edited volume on the work of the Nigerian poet and biographer Ezenwa-Ohaete. This was the first full-length study of this important Nigerian poet and was designed as a tribute to him as he had died of liver cancer the year before. As always Geoff was generous with his tribute to those he admired and it is marvellous that we can do a little in the same way for him here today. Can you hear him? I can. Throwing his head back in that wonderful guffaw of a laugh and saying as he always did when appreciating something: "Marvelous! Marvelous!"

That sums up what we think of you and your life Geoff. "Marvelous! Marvelous"

Bionote: Gareth Griffiths is an Emeritus Professor at the University of Western Australia. He has written extensively on postcolonial literature and theory with an emphasis on African literatures