

*Larger than Life: A Tribute to Geoff Davis (1943–2018)*¹

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Abstract: A celebration of the life of Geoff Davis with special emphasis on the many activities he pursued and his indefatigable energy

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It's time to honour someone who throughout his professional life was pivotally instrumental in establishing, forming and consolidating postcolonial studies in Germany and beyond. I feel honoured to have been entrusted with this daunting task and am hoping that in performing it, I'll be able to tap into just a bit of that huge and apparently endless supply of positive energy that was one of Geoff Davis's many exceptional characteristics. I would like to start by picking out just one of the multitudinous and multifarious lifetime achievements of our honoree that owed their existence at least in part to that enormous energy, namely the Rodopi/Brill "Cross/Cultures" series we are all familiar with and that has provided the soundtrack for the way our field has evolved over the last three decades. This venture was originally co-founded more than thirty years ago by Geoff together with his colleagues Hena Maes-Jelinek (Liège) and Gordon Collier (Giessen). Visionary though the intrepid trio were, I don't think even they imagined at the time that this series was ultimately going to run to more than 200 volumes – a tangible reflection of the individual stamp Geoff put on the world. Look on his works, ye mighty – and *admire!* Geoff, editor *extraordinaire*.

My aim in this tribute is not so much to mourn the death of a great friend and a great man as to celebrate his life. What follows will be more a eulogy than an elegy. Already a legend in his own lifetime, Geoff Davis was a man of many lifetime achievements. When I first met him nearly fifty years ago in England (yes, the temporal dimensions are geological), he had already been living and working in Aachen for four years. Little did I realise that I was going to end up as Boswell to his Johnson (not Boris, Samuel!) When I last saw him – in Aachen – he was his usual cheerful, ebullient self. Despite having been

retired for over a decade, he was as busy as ever, bursting with projects and full of travel plans...*Einfach unkaputtbar*. Geoff, the indestructible. Geoff Davis played many roles in his life but Geoff as retiree was one he manifestly didn't intend to play. Even just thinking of this purely nominal pensioner's punishing programme of work and travel was enough to make lesser mortals balk and blanch. Geoff's motto was clearly: More of the same. When asked by concerned colleagues how he managed to do all the things he did and how much longer he was intending to keep on doing them, he would respond: "What else should I do?" The German notion: *Unruhestand* comes to mind – a popular, jocular antonym to the standard term for retirement: *Ruhestand* (literally: a state of repose).

Shakespeare's Jacques almost got it right. One man in his time does indeed play many parts. True enough. But the man whose life we are celebrating tonight played far more parts than the average. And unlike the average man, he didn't gradually decline into dotage; no slippered pantaloons he. Much less did his voice revert to childish treble, pipes and whistles nor did he ever reach the final stage of second childishness and mere oblivion. No, Geoff went from strength to strength.

Chugging to and fro from Chotro to Chotro, from Chair to Chair, with the odd CHOGM chucked in along the way, Geoff continued with a workload that would tire out many a full-time worker and kindle work-weary thoughts in them of burn-out. Burn-out?! Geoff and burn-out? More like burn-on. Burn on, baby – burn on! Geoff, the inextinguishable; Geoff, the inexhaustible.

One of those many parts Geoff played was that of "Mr Commonwealth" – sharply focused on his own very *uncommon* wealth of interests, commitment and involvement, publications etc. Latterly (well into his retirement) he was really mixing with the mighty, the great and the good of the Commonwealth. At some point he met the Queen and subsequently appeared to have been sent on some sort of high-powered top-secret mission to Zimbabwe with a royal remit to investigate what was happening to cultural life there on behalf of the Commonwealth High Command, about which he told us mysteriously and suspiciously little, making us wonder whether he was perhaps not allowed to divulge anything to anyone. Not even me! He must have been sworn to secrecy because just for once he was very tight-lipped about what exactly he was doing... It did seem fitting that his last role should have been that of Special Agent OHMSS – code name: 009?

Another role was Geoff, the ideas man. But Geoff wouldn't have been Geoff if he had been *purely* an ideas man. He was at the same time Geoff, the *implementation-of-ideas* man. The one who put ideas into practice, set them in motion, got things done. *He* had the ideas, then found the colleagues and friends to implement and realise them together with him – be they joint classes or departmental lecture series in which as many members of staff as possible could be persuaded to give their take on a given theme. (Whilst some members of staff could be pretty reluctant, Geoff could be extremely persuasive). Not to mention books edited by him, with articles by various hands; workshops; conferences (the bigger the better – preferably in conjunction with some other association; wherever possible what he liked to call, with not all that much hyperbole, a "three-ring circus");

books series – you name it. Well, *he* usually named it, actually...He *was* the ideas man, after all.

Geoff, the organisation-of-conferences man. Later on, Geoff, the experienced consultant (for a whole generation of younger colleagues following in his footsteps in organising conferences etc. themselves). Geoff, the *éminence grise*. In a word (several words, actually): Geoff, the facilitator; Geoff, the enabler and encourager, Geoff, the mover and shaker. Not forgetting Geoff, the networker supreme (*avant la lettre*), Geoff, the team-teacher, Geoff, the collaborator. Geoff, the project manager. He dreamed up countless joint projects with colleagues and students, involving and encouraging them to provide their own input. But at bottom, he was the instigator, the driving force, the energiser. The visionary who made sure the dream came true.

Then there was Geoff, the *time* manager. How on earth did he manage to read all those books – in all those literatures and genres? To edit all those articles, papers, journals and books? To watch all those films (or “movies”, as in a rare departure from his predilection for British English he preferred to call them)? To go to all those plays? To attend all those concerts? To see all those exhibitions? To visit all those countries? To bone up on the latest cultural and political developments in all those countries? To catch up on the latest gossip...?

Just how did he do it? Sure, he was always “writing against the clock,” as he liked to put it. But – miraculously – despite *taking time to tell you* that he was, once again, writing against the clock – he usually made it. He usually ended up *beating* the clock and delivering the paper. And he hardly ever appeared stressed or driven. Yet he wasn't one of those enviable people who could get by on four hour's sleep a night. And whenever you just happened to bump into him somewhere, he would always have time for a drink and a natter. He lived the good life. He loved the other good things in life – quite apart from literature. No ivory-tower-dweller, he.

Where did he get his legendarily boundless – almost superhuman – energy from? The question, it seems, must remain purely rhetorical. I, like many others, have so far found no answer to it. The same goes for his infectious enthusiasm – or rather enthusiasms. Geoff, the ultimate enthusiast. He liked to say that one of the best pieces of advice his mother used to give him was: “Don't lose your enthusiasm!” As if he needed to be told!

In a *Guardian* review of George Steiner's magisterial opus on translation *After Babel* (1975), Idris Parry, Professor of German Literature at the University of Manchester, asked, rhetorically: “How can one man have read and absorbed so much?” Had Professor Parry ever come across my esteemed colleague, he might well have repeated his question – but he would have had to expand it to include: “written, edited...*and interacted*” – with so many people, had such a huge worldwide network of fellow-scholars and fellow-enthusiasts, for the generating of whose enthusiasm he was often personally responsible.

Just take a look at the man's CV – if you have an evening to spare. For once the cliché is justified: his publications really *were* too numerous to mention. I once planned to mark the 50th anniversary of Geoff's historic arrival in Aachen by putting on an event inspired

by the Dublin Bloomsday read-in of *Ulysses*. Over the full twenty-four hours of “DavisDay”, the titles of his complete works would have been recited on the steps of Aachen Town Hall. Parallel to this readathon I was going to curate an exhaustive exhibition (retrospective *and* prospective) of his personal tee-shirt collection in Aachen’s Ludwig Forum for International Art, as a warm-up for the definitive show in the V & A. Geoff just had to be the ultimate seen-the-movie-got-the-poster-bought-*and*-worn-the-tee-shirt man. Geoff Davis wore his heart on his tee-shirt. Unfortunately, the first of these projects was stymied by some medieval municipal bye-law dating back to Charlemagne. (The second project also came to naught – because the museum needed the space for the Kylie Minogue exhibition.)

To return briefly to Geoff’s capacity for enthusiasm. It included his apparent ability to invariably be the first to hear about – and purchase – and have personally signed by the author – the latest book or books. Not to mention publishing the latest paper and editing the latest collection of essays. But the one book he himself only got to see *after* the whole world knew of its existence was his *festschrift*, Being at the receiving end of a *festschrift* is sufficient distinction in itself, but not many recipients get to get a *two-volume* festchrift (*two* whole books – more like an *uberfestschrift*, as it were) with a total of some 800 pages and more than sixty contributions by friends and colleagues. Hardly surprising, though, considering not only Geoff’s very high profile in his chosen field and the great esteem in which he was held within that field. Or rather, his chosen fields. Geoff, the *festschrift*ee *par excellence*.

Where other, equally industrious and brilliant, scholars spend an academic life-time delving into the culture of *one* field – Australian or Indian or South African – or German Studies [*sic!*], Geoff managed to do X and Y *and* Z with thoroughness and insight, always backed up by first-hand and highly up-to-date background knowledge, and still keep up with developments in all these individual specialisms. In short, a phenomenon. Not a generalist – a hyper-specialist. Geoff, the true all-rounder. And despite the enormous breadth of these disparate activities, their yield was never ephemeral. On the contrary, it seemed to be infinitely accretive. Geoff seemed to have almost total recall of everything he had read and seen and done. The sheer size and scope of that *festschrift* reflects the enormous impact he had on all of those fields and more. It’s an appropriate testimony to an awe-inspiring achievement. Geoff, the New Renaissance Man.

World Literature? Geoff was onto – and into – this field long before the term was conceived of, let alone coined. This “roving scholar,” as Frank Schulze-Engler (2018) has so aptly dubbed him, spanned the globe. How that globe is going to miss one of its most intrepid serial master-trotters! How inadequate the concept of “frequent flyer” seems when applied to this continent-hopper, ocean-collector! The understatement of the century. A man who needed the quadruple extra-large (XXXXL) 48-page version of a British passport (referred to even officially as a “Jumbo” passport) – to provide sufficient space to accommodate multiple rubber stamps from all the many countries he visited. Constantly on the move, restlessly exploring the world, unstoppable. He himself liked to attribute this innate wanderlust to having been brought up in the vicinity of the thriving port of Liverpool, with all its daily bustle of ships from all over the world coming and

going, plying their way across the oceans. Yes, the man certainly made his mark way beyond Merseyside – on both the academic and the wider world.

Permit me to intercalate a couple of anecdotes as I work towards my peroration. The first illustrates the personal touch, which Geoff had – and he had it in spades. The scene is the first Aachen conference organised by Geoff (with the assistance of a team of dedicated student helpers), which took place in 1988 (a year before ASNEL/GNEL – the predecessor of GAPS – was founded). The conference theme was: “Crisis and Conflict in the New English Literatures”. In the words of one observer: “Am liebsten hätte er jeden Gast einzeln am Bahnhof abgeholt und dort schon willkommen geheißen.” [If he’d had his way, he would have gone to greet every single guest as they arrived at Aachen Main Station.] He even drove to the (pre-Schengen) German–Belgian border in person to ensure that one of his international guests was granted free passage. His guest – one Edward Kamau Brathwaite – reciprocated by presenting his host with a poem entitled “Aachen”, which kicked off by darkly prophesying the death of “the Empire”... That was all shortly before the actual conference opened. Appropriately enough for such an historic event, the official opening took place in the historic *Aula Carolina*. Had the wow factor already been invented at that time, it would have been huge – all these people from all over the world turning up, joining the very long queue of guests, each personally greeting their host: “Hi, Geoff!” ... “Hi, Geoff!...” “Hi, Geoff!” *ad infinitum*. As a somewhat staid senior colleague – one of many in our Department who hadn’t yet been bitten by the PoCo bug – noted with a mixture of faint disapproval and envy in his voice: “Auch solche aus südlichen Gefilden!” [There were even some people from sunnier climes!]

By Aachen standards, that conference certainly was a mega-event. It attracted 300 participants from 35 countries. A couple of days after the three hundred had dispersed, the local paper reported that the world-famous Aachen University Clinic had just staged a symposium on behalf of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Urologie [the German Association of Urologists] with a total of over *one* hundred participants from *nine* countries. Peanuts! What a personal triumph for Geoff!

My second anecdote could be headed “Cross-Cultural Qualifications”. After Geoff had been “allowed” to teach for a couple of years in Aachen, he was informed somewhat abruptly and brusquely that having no more than a BA he was under-qualified for the job. The degree he had was declared by the university admin. to be “*kein gültiger Studienabschluss*” [not a valid final examination] equivalent merely to the *Zwischenprüfung* [intermediate examination] at most. Well, Mies van der Rohe, no less, was once rejected as a candidate for an honorary doctorate in his native Aachen – on the grounds that despite his massive international renown he unfortunately failed to fulfil the formal requirement of having an *Abiturzeugnis* [A-levels], the usual prerequisite for admission to a German university.

How times change – even in the academic world. Geoff, who at the time fumed furiously at the implication that an Oxford degree was being deemed by the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule Aachen [Aachen University of Technology] to be worth virtually nothing, later enjoyed the irony and the belated satisfaction of the BA (with the full status of a first university degree) actually being established all of a sudden in a big way at German universities in the wake of the Bologna accords. In a further ironic development three decades later, the supposedly unqualified *Lektor* ultimately went on to achieve the ultimate *Abschluss* [final exam], the highest academic accolade Germany has to offer, viz.

Habilitation [second, or higher doctorate; or post-doctoral qualification]. A measure of how dramatically things had changed within his lifetime.

I'm going to conclude with a shaggy-dog story. It revolves around a man called Robinson, a member of a London club, where he has made a name for himself as a supreme *dropper* of names, claiming that he regularly receives personal invitations from VIPs all over the world to go and visit them. In the first two cases – Winston Churchill and President Eisenhower (it's a very old joke!) – his fellow-members were prepared to simply believe him, and to be suitably impressed. But when Robinson announced that he had been invited to the Vatican, they decided that this time they wanted to see for themselves. They wanted ocular proof.

On the due date, they all travelled to Rome and duly assembled on an even more than usually crowded St Peter's Square. Necks were craning, the suspense was building. Then suddenly right across the Square, on the papal balcony way up high on the opposite side, two tiny figures emerged. Spotting a pair of *carabinieri* standing conveniently close by, one of the group asked them, pointing to the distant balcony: "Excuse me, officer. Is that His Holiness up there?" Slowly removing his sunglasses and peering into the distance, the policeman shrugged his shoulders, replying somewhat hesitantly: "I don't know, *signore*. But the man on the left, he is Robinson!"

For Robinson, read Davis.

Geoff Davis was a giant of our field. Liverpudlian, Oxonian, *Weltbürger* [citizen of the world], he bestrode our PoCo world like a colossus. Here's to his memory.

Endnote

1. This text is a speech delivered on May 31st 2019 in Bremen, at the annual GAPS conference.

Works Cited

Schulze-Engler, Frank, "In Memory of a Roving Scholar: Geoff Davis (1943–2018)." *acolit. Newsletter der Gesellschaft für Anglophone Postkoloniale Studien* 75 (2018): 2–3.

Bionote: Born in the UK, Peter Marsden read Modern Languages, with a special emphasis on German language and literature, at the Universities of Oxford, London and Manchester. Relocating to Germany, he spent most of his working life as a lecturer in the English Department at Aachen University of Technology – a post from which he retired in 2007. His research interests encompass linguistics (varieties of English, bilingualism, translation studies) as well as literature, with a particular focus on Australian, New Zealand and Irish poetry. He has published on the oral tradition in Aboriginal and Maori writing as well as on individual authors including Peter Bland, Peter Goldsworthy, Les Murray, Robert Sullivan and Hone Tuwhare. A long-term project on literary relations between Germany and New Zealand continues to be ongoing and open-ended.