

Geoffrey Davis: Interactions with Australia, Its Literature and Its Culture

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Abstract: A description of Geoff Davis's wide interest in Australian Studies, in particular war literature and indigeneity

Keywords: Geoff Davis, Australian literature, Aboriginal culture

Geoff loved Australia. He came first on a holiday with two German friends and their little daughter in 1982. They hired a wreck of a car, drove it through a swollen creek and got stuck there. I met Geoff three years later in Singapore, when he attended his first ACLALS conference. It was my second; and I remember the paper was on a comparative Australian/Canadian topic, which would have interested him. The papers from that conference, edited by Edwin Thumboo & Thiru Kandiah, did not appear in print until 1995 – thirteen years later – due to circumstances that Geoff and I were debating somewhat mischievously whether or not to reveal in the history of ACLALS that, unfortunately, we were still working on when he died. 1995 was also the year of Geoff's second visit to Australia, to take up a senior research fellowship at Curtin University, in Western Australia. He stayed with Anne Brewster, who satisfied his urge to see the outback by taking him on a road trip six hundred kilometres east, out through the wheatbelt and into the desert, to the old gold-mining town of Kalgoorlie. They visited some remote Aboriginal settlements and one night stayed in a country pub in the middle of nowhere. Anne says: "I remember that I had to drag him outside at night - he was a bit alarmed at how quiet and empty it was - to see the Milky Way and the bright evening sky which astonished him." But that night Anne accidentally dropped her contact lenses into some kind of fluid other than the usual saline solution and in the morning she couldn't wear them, which meant that she couldn't drive. Geoff was thrust into the driver's seat, all the way back to Perth, forced to learn the art of outback endurance driving. At the end

of his Fellowship, Geoff flew to Sydney to meet his girlfriend, Ingrid, they rented a car and drove up to Armidale to visit the Australian poet, Michael Sharkey, who had been a guest at the Autumn Summer School on the New Literatures at Aachen the previous year. I taught in the same department as Michael, so this gave me a chance to renew my acquaintance with Geoff, and to meet Ingrid for the first time. But the meeting was brief, as they wanted to be back in Sydney for the New Year's Eve fireworks over the harbour. And it was there, in the shadow of the Harbour Bridge, at the heart of the Eora homelands, where the European settlement of Australia began, that Geoff proposed marriage to Ingrid, and thankfully she accepted.

Of course, this put the seal on Geoff's fond regard for Australia. But his interest in Australian Literature and Culture ran ahead of it. He attended his first British-Australian Studies conference at Warwick in 1985, his first German-Australian Studies conference at Blaubeuren in 1989, his first Aboriginal Literature conference at Düsseldorf in 1993 – and he publicised all of these by reporting on them subsequently in print. Sadly, none of those reports – and there were many others over the years - are captured by the austlit database, which is the most comprehensive bibliography of publications concerning Australian literature. Geoff gave his first conference presentation on Australian literature at a conference in Tübingen in 1990; and the following year he and Gordon Collier published a piece on the iconography of landscape in Australian film. But it was written in German, and it appeared in a book published by a German publisher, so again it went unreported in Australia, although it was subsequently published in English.

The austlit database lists twelve titles by Geoff, five as an author and seven as an editor. Three of his five authored articles focus upon Australia's war literature. This is important for two reasons: first, Australia has taken part in so many more wars than Australians themselves realise, including of course its own frontier wars against Aboriginal peoples, but also the first Taranaki War, the Invasion of Waikato, and numerous other conflicts and wars that are not captured by the ANZAC emphasis. The second reason that Geoff's writings on war literature are important is that, although war has been a significant shaping influence on Australian society and national identity, Australian war literature is not as well-studied or as well-known as its British counterpart, even within Australia; and there is no readily agreed-upon canon of Australian war writing. Geoff's articles are far from typical. The first, titled "The Country We Might Have Been," takes a comparative perspective, drawing Australian and Canadian war literature into a single frame. The second is a review essay focused upon Noah Riseman and Richard Trembath's book *Defending Country*, which documents the military experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military veterans of the Vietnam War, ignored altogether during the campaign for Aboriginal rights, and "forgotten by the majority of Australians." This of course marked Geoff's growing interest in Indigenous issues. But the Indigenous experience is not the only marginalised element in the war literature; and the third of Geoff's articles in this area focuses on the Bangladeshi-Australian writer, Adib Khan's novel, *Homecoming* (2003), about Australia's migrant experience of the Vietnam War.

The austlit database also lists a piece that Geoff wrote in 2007 about Nicholas Hasluck's novel, *Our Man K*, the story of a German exile loosely based on the experience of Egon

Kirsch, an outspoken opponent of Nazism, and a well-known Communist, who visited Australia in 1934 to speak against War and Fascism, and was promptly arrested as an illegal immigrant. The Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which operated to exclude aliens in accordance with the White Australian Policy, insisted on a dictation test for any undesirable seeking entry to Australia - a passage of fifty words that could be dictated to them in any European language. Kirsh was a problem because he was fluent in ten European languages. So they gave him the test in in Scottish Gaelic, and of course he failed. But the High Court found subsequently Scottish Gaelic was not within the fair meaning of the Act, and overturned Kirsch's conviction as an illegal immigrant. Geoff's article on Hasluck's novel led him subsequently to write a longer piece on the depiction of German exiles in South African and Indian writing, which really needs to be read alongside the article on Hasluck and Kirsch, if we are to appreciate the full scope of Geoff's insights on exile and interculturality. As Frank Schultz-Engler wrote in the obituary for Geoff in *Matatu* - the journal that he co-edited on African Culture and Society -the connections that Geoff set up between German literary history and Australian politics were far from random. Geoff entered academia through German studies; he wrote his PhD on the work of Arnold Zweig, the socialist-humanist writer persecuted by the Nazi regime who emigrated to Palestine and returned to the German Democratic Republic after the end of World War II. And Geoff retained a vivid interest in German literature throughout his academic career. Sadly, Geoff did a lot more work on Egon Kirsch that he ever managed to publish. But his piece of Hasluck's novel, in which Kirsch figures, is one of his best.

But Geoff was also a wonderful enabler and facilitator of other people's research and the Cross/Cultures series (Brill/Rodopi), which he co-founded in 1990 with Hena Maes-Jelinek and Gordon Collier, and which he co-edited for almost thirty years with Benedicte Ledent and Gordon, produced more than two hundred books. Many of these books were first books by scholars who subsequently became prime movers in the fields of postcolonial and world literatures. The Cross/Cultures series spans the literatures of all the English-speaking world, and many non-anglophone countries and regions besides. But at least 60 of its 206 volumes, according to the austlit database, include Australian content. Four of those Geoff himself co-edited; and those four contain 54 items of Australian content. The most significant of the four is undoubtedly *Aratjara*, an anthology of Aboriginal culture and Literature that Geoff co-edited with Dieter Riemenschneider in 1997, inspired by and titled after the Aratjara art exhibition, the first and perhaps still the only comprehensive touring exhibition of Aboriginal art initiated and controlled by Aboriginal people which had opened at the Kunstsammlung in Düsseldorf a couple of years earlier. The impact of this exhibition was enormous. In Düsseldorf alone it was seen by 55,000 visitors. But the impact of the International Symposium on Aboriginal Literature that Geoff organised to coincide with the exhibition at the Kunstsammlung, "Aratjara: Literature of the First Australians," was also massive.

This symposium, held during the United Nations Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, attracted visual artists, writers and academics from all over the world. In attendance were the Aboriginal poet Lionel Fogarty, making his first visit to Europe; theatre director and

dramatist Bob Maza, who at the time was working with the Black Diamond Theatre in Poitiers; documentary filmmaker, Frances Calvert, who had just completed her second film, about the Torres Strait Islanders, *Cracks in the Mask* based in Berlin and Sydney – sadly, she too, died last year. David Mowaljarlai came from the Kimberley, and Jutta Malnic, author of *Yorro Yorro: Spirit of the Kimberley*, which was launched at the Symposium. The book that Geoff and Dieter edited after the symposium was the first collection of essays on Aboriginal culture come out of Germany. The message of the Aratjara art exhibition was that Aboriginal people were a sovereign nation. That is why the organisers had avoided the usual political and commercial sponsorships. In fact, Aratjara means messenger. Geoff picked up the message and he carried it forward in all his work subsequently. He carried it forward in his collaboration with the Indian activists, Ganesh Devy and Kalyan Chakravarty, which between 2009 and 2016 produced no less than 6 books – six books in seven years - on indigeneity; on culture and representation; imagination and expression; nomadism; indigenous knowledges; on the performance of indigenous identity in the arts; and on the loss of language.

It is perhaps surprising, in view of Geoff's abiding interest in Australian literature and culture, that he rarely attended the biennial conferences organised by the European Association for the Study of Australia, especially since he maintained close friendships with successive generations of EASA Chairs and also entertained friendly diplomatic relations with the Association in the context of his role as Chair of (E)ACLALS. Marc Delrez (University of Liège) explains this as follows: "EASA typically held its major conferences in the third week of September, which sadly clashed with 'the wife's birthday'. Diplomacy can take one only so far after all. Imagine the glint of wistfulness in Geoff's eyes as he envisioned the successive venues: Barcelona, Lecce in the south of Italy, Prato in Tuscany, Palma de Mallorca... But no, "'the wife' will not buy this." But Geoff kept stocking up on Australian books and movies, cramming them into his already cramped and top-heavy apartment in downtown Aachen. He was, as Marc says, "incredibly well-read" and always "up-to-date in the field."

Geoff was one of my closest friends. I travelled with him all over the world. I started books with him which we obviously will never finish. We were working on a history of ACLALS and we interviewed a number of people, whose memories were sharp, sometimes recalling details so scandalous we knew we would never be able to include them. From his deathbed, Geoff asked me to bring him a copy of Behrouz Boochani's recently published book about life in the Manus Island Detention Centre, *No Friend But the Mountains*. I was planning to give it to him on his seventy-fifth birthday, but he died three days before it, on the very day I arrived in Aachen, and I did not see him. Nonetheless, I did celebrate his birthday, with his wife and a few close friends who had travelled with him to Basutoland in 1975 on the fateful journey that opened his eyes to the injustices of colonialism and set him on his inspirational journey of exploration into the field we know today as postcolonial literature.

Bionote: Russell McDougall is Professor of English at the University of New England, NSW, Australia. His latest book, coedited with Anne Collett and Sue Thomas, is *Tracking the Literature of Tropical Weather. Typhoons, Hurricanes, and Cyclones* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). With Iain Davidson he coedited *The Roth Family, Anthropology, and Colonial Administration* (Left Coast Press, 2008), with Peter Hulme *Writing, Travel and Empire* (I. B. Tauris, 2007) and with Gillian Whitlock *Australian/Canadian Literatures in English: Comparative Perspectives* (Methuen, 1987). He has also published widely on Australian, African and Caribbean Literatures.