

An Open Letter to Geoff Davis

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Abstract: An open letter in which the author remembers the various conferences in which he coincided with Geoff and the friendship that the two built up over the years.

Keywords: Geoff Davis, equanimity of spirit, postcolonial conferences

Dear Geoff,

Whether my letter will reach you I cannot say but what I can say is: “what we really want is that we should not be forgotten. That our lives should not be completely wiped out as if we have never been”. I came across these words recently in Shashi Deshpande’s novel *Shadow Play*. And that’s what the few lines I am writing to you are meant to tell you. The more so when I remember the day Frank Schulze-Engler gave me the totally unexpected news of your passing and I felt fate had almost decided that I should accompany you. I had been taken to the intensive-care station of our hospital after a massive heart attack. It all seemed so unreal with Frank, the messenger, sitting next to my bed looking like a large green frog in his protective clothing.

‘Not to forget’ means to remember, and there are many occasions and events we shared and discussions with you that now come back to me. I think we had our first longish exchanges on academic matters at the EACLALS conference in Nice in 1988, followed by many more talks at conferences we both attended. You kindly surprised me by inviting me to the Trento conference of German and Italian scholars in 1990 sharing our interest in postcolonial literature, and to a conference on Australian Aboriginal culture perfectly organised by you in Düsseldorf in 1993. Generous as ever, you drew me into jointly editing the proceedings of this conference, an unusual book published in 1997 under the title *Aratjara* and assembling more than two dozen contributors of seven countries who set out to introduce a hardly noticed field of studies. And you surprised me again not only with your essay on “The Experience of War in Canadian and Australian Literature” contributed to *Crabtracks*, a collection of essays published in my honour in 2002, but also with your active involvement, together with Ganesh N. Devy, in the promotion of Indian culture at several Chotro conferences, among them “Chotro Three” in Delhi and Simla in

2010; a great international conference I happily remember and documented in *Knowing Differently: The Challenge of the Indigenous* you co-edited with Ganesh and published in 2014.

Could I ever respond to your selfless way of sharing your thoughts and activities in our joint field of studies, research and teaching? Perhaps to some extent when we met in Frankfurt on several occasions to discuss your post-doctoral thesis on *Voices of Justice – Apartheid and Beyond in South Africa*; or my contribution as one of your referees; or occasionally to talk about our shared interest in the various associations we were actively involved in like ASNEL or EACLALS. Certainly, you became an outstanding personality who contributed so much to organising their activities, even continuing with this work after your retirement. This reminds me of late 1999 and my suggesting your name to Goethe-Universität Frankfurt to replace me till a successor would be appointed. I heard from students how much they appreciated your presence which confirmed my expectation you would continue and expand on my work.

What else will I remember? Certainly, was in 2011 – in The Strand just off on my shoulder which I took to be a before turning around and seeing your that could not be replaced by an displeasure when we exchanged and related less happy experiences about our work, our colleagues or writers – like your story of the exorbitant telephone bill incurred by an Australian author at the Aratjara conference for which you were neither prepared financially nor otherwise. For me your smile always meant you could distance yourself even when disappointed, which proved you had an equanimity of spirit I have encountered less often among my German colleagues.



a moment – I think it Trafalgar Square, a hand policeman's or a thief's beaming face. A smile expression of

Sorry, I can't any longer see you keep smiling. Instead I'll try to repeat these words to myself when remembering you whom I last saw at my 80th birthday party in 2015 and Frank's 60th in May 2017.

Dieter

Bionote: Professor Dr. Dieter Riemenschneider obtained his Ph.D. with a thesis on *The Modern Indian Novel in English* in 1971, taught Commonwealth literature / English Language Literatures at Goethe-University Frankfurt (1972-1999), and in 1993 set up the research/teaching centre “New Literatures and Cultures in English”. He founded, edited and co-edited the bi-annual newsletter ACOLIT (1977-99) and was Chair of “The Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English” (1989-93). His main research areas are Indian, African and Australian Aboriginal literature in English as well as New Zealand / Aotearoan Māori literature and culture. Most recently published are *Gentle Round the Curves: Selected Essays on Indian Writing in English* (2016); his memoirs *Fluchtpunkte: Erinnerertes, Anekdotisches 1935-1994* (2018) and *Neuseeland fürs Handgepäck* (2019), an edited collection of essays by New Zealand authors.