

It all started when

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Abstract: A brief summary of how Geoff Davis first became involved in Commonwealth Literature following a visit to Southern Africa and experiencing applied apartheid.

Keywords: Geoff Davis, South Africa, apartheid

I first met Geoff, well, I can't really remember when or where and I'm sure he wouldn't know any more either, but it must have been around 1973 and almost certainly in a pub. Geoff had already been at the Technical University in Aachen for some 6 years or so and I'd worked in various educational institutions there for 4 years. Geoff and I grew to be great friends, best mates really, and for many, many years Geoff, and his wife Ingrid, have been our most welcome guests over Christmas. Again, no-one really knows since when exactly, but Geoff and Ingrid would drive down every Christmas Day, no matter what the weather, a round trip of over 600 km to enjoy a traditional British Christmas dinner with all the trimmings and join in the festivities (see photo below). Normally they would stay over a day or two and we would enjoy long walks together, go to a concert, exhibition or just gorge our way through the leftovers. At times, when the snow was deep and crisp and even, this never deterred them, preferring then to suffer the inconveniences of German rail travel (not cracked up to be what people's illusions of German efficiency would expect them to believe) and my daughters revealed to me recently that they had always regarded Geoff as more of an uncle. Few people know that Geoff was great with kids.



Xmas Day 2005: Sitting between my two daughters, waiting for the turkey, and really getting into the swing of things.

However, I digress.

It all started when, in 1975, a good friend of ours, Hamish (a white Rhodesian, obviously of Scots heritage) announced he would be going home in the summer to attend his sister's wedding and foolishly added, "Why don't you come, too". So, we did. We flew to Johannesburg together with Geoff's then girl-friend Renate and another good friend, Gerd, where we stayed a few days with friends of Hamish. Perfect hosts, they took us to the Kyalami race track (which put us off Formula 1 racing for life) and we also had our first real Indian nosh at "The Garden of Allah" in Jo'burg. The food was magnificent and it was this first real experience of Indian cuisine which triggered off a lifelong love of Indian cooking involving many happy evenings together extolling the wonders of Madhur Jaffrey's wisdom in her *Introduction to Indian Cooking* and vying with each other as to who could produce the best meal. Indian food in Germany in those days was practically unknown such that we either had to either import the spices we needed from the UK or visit the local apothecary.

However, this trip was also our first taste of apartheid. At first, being white, we hardly noticed it but as time passed this iniquitous system frequently raised its ugly head. From Jo'burg we travelled by train through Botswana to Bulawayo and Ian Smith's Rhodesia where we met up with Hamish again. He'd flown on in advance to be back with his parents who graciously accommodated us for the period of the wedding. We were typical tourists and drove around Wankie National Park to view the wildlife and spent some time at the

Victoria Falls. It was, however, a remark made by one of the female guests at the wedding feast which took us aback when she said, "... but blacks aren't humans." – and, she meant it!!

From Bulawayo we took the train to Harare (then Salisbury) where we considered giving Ian Smith a piece of our minds – he held a regular surgery in those days – but, of course, didn't. We hitchhiked separately from Harare back to Jo'burg, taking in the Zimbabwe Ruins on the way, and there we picked up a camper van and spent the next few weeks touring around Swaziland and South Africa.

Once back in Aachen, we remembered what that one guest had said and began to investigate South African society, apartheid, we became members of the South African Institute of Race Relations and actively involved ourselves in anti-apartheid and third world groups. At some stage in the late 70s Geoff irresponsibly suggested, "Why don't we write a book?". The target group was to be 6th form levels of German schools. Naively, I agreed. And so after a couple of years of prevarication was born "The Privileged and the Dispossessed" comprising a 472 page tome of a teacher's handbook and a thinner volume containing an anthology of South African writers of all creeds: the student's book. The books were published in Germany in the early 80s as part of the series "Teaching English and American Studies". We didn't sell many but we were proud of the fact that our books were officially banned by the then government of South Africa as being "prejudicial to the safety of the state"! In the eyes of the then SA government, Geoff was now an "Enemy of the State", a "terrorist".

To my great shame I have to admit that Geoff was the workhorse behind these two volumes. Everybody knows what a workaholic he was. Thus it was Hamish's sister's wedding that led to Geoff's subsequent career, eventually becoming one of the world's recognised experts on Commonwealth literature until one day, perhaps the pinnacle of his career, Her Majesty the Queen was presented to him, the Chairman of the Commonwealth Literature Conference (although I suspect that with Geoff being such a workaholic she probably had to wait some time until he had a slot free !).

On a more personal note: Geoff, a great mate, considerate, polite, generous to a fault and in an old-fashioned way, for me, the embodiment of a British "gentleman" and, for his many students over the years, a model of "Britishness". A fountain of knowledge such that some might maintain the "V" in Dr. G. V. Davis stood not for Vernon but "Vikipaedia". I do believe he was deserving of more recognition and, thanks to my innate indolence, I never realised my intention of recommending him for a mention in, say, the New Year's Honours list. I shall never forgive myself, if anyone ever deserved that honour, it was Geoff !

I, his mate, shall miss him.

Bionote:

Michael Senior, born 1947 in Sheffield. Subsequently, nothing really.