

## News and Tribute

### Bruce Bennett Remembered

Born: Perth, Australia, 1941

Died: Canberra, Australia, 2012 (Aged 71)

The study of Australian literature as a key element in understanding the culture and the nation has a few heroes in Western Australia, but none greater than Bruce Bennett. He taught, encouraged and promoted Australian literature and its serious study in Western Australia, Australia, Asia, Europe and North America for forty years. With his friend and colleague John Hay, Bruce saw the study of English with an Australian flavour instilled in the WA secondary school curriculum, and he helped prepare texts for that curriculum. Bruce championed the study of Australian literature at The University of Western Australia, then a controversial move, and he taught at the University from 1968 until taking up a Chair in English at the Australian Defence Forces Academy campus of the University of New South Wales in 1993. Co-editor of WA's major literary magazine *Westerly* from 1975-1992, he also published more than 20 books, a number of significant government reports, and approximately 100 literary essays.

Bruce Harry Bennett grew up in Perth and won a scholarship to Hale School, where he was a star student and sportsman. He went on to study at The University of Western Australia, graduating in 1963, and won a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Pembroke College, Oxford University from 1964-1967. He later achieved an MA degree in Education from London University. It was while in England that he met his wife Patricia. Back in Australia, Bruce carried out the work that established him as a key figure in the study of English and English literature in secondary education. His interest in education as a field of activity remained undiminished when he shifted within The University of Western Australia from Education to English. Adept in the study and teaching of both fiction and poetry, Bruce's interests gradually shifted from moderns such as T.S. Eliot to the then fledgling area of Australian literary studies.

Bruce Bennett taught and researched in this new area for the rest of his life, sometimes concentrating on WA writing, as in *The Literature of Western Australia* (1979), sometimes placing Australian literature in relation to other world literatures, as in *Crossing Cultures: Essays on Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific* (1996). He was the founding Director of the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature (now the "Westerly Centre") at UWA; a Board Member of the newly founded Association for the Study of Australian Literature and its

President from 1983-1985; participated on the Boards of Black Swan Theatre and Fremantle Arts Centre Press (now “Fremantle Press”); was a Commissioner on the Australian National Commission for UNESCO from 1985-1990; Vice-Chair of the International Executive of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies from 1998-2001; and served two terms on the Australia-India Council from 2002, as well as convening conferences, acting as editorial consultant for national and international literary journals, advising various universities on curriculum, mentoring younger scholars and doing much else besides.

Amongst his published works, Bruce Bennett was an editor of *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998), and *Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth* (2003). He was the leading scholar on an Australian sense of place and the writing of Peter Cowan and of Peter Porter, evidenced by his *An Australian Compass: Essays on Place and Direction in Australian Literature* (1991), *Spirit in Exile: Peter Porter and His Poetry* (1991), and *Peter Cowan: New Critical Essays* (1992). He also wrote important essays on the work of notable WA writers such as Randolph Stow, Dorothy Hewett, Ee Tiang Hong and Tim Winton. It is notable that his publications include both individually authored works and many collaborations.

Bruce Bennett was a visiting professor at universities in England, India, Indonesia, Italy, Singapore, Spain, The Philippines and the USA. Amongst the many honours awarded in an extraordinary career were the WA Premier’s Book Award in 1992 (for his study of Peter Porter), and Fellowships of both the Australian College of Education and the Academy of Humanities. He was made an Officer of the Order of Australia in 1993, and awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree by UNSW in 2004.

This list of achievements gives only the outline of the man, not a flesh and blood sense of him. Perhaps more important than any list is the perception of him around the world as an enthusiastic, genial, gentle, humble and utterly humane man, with a wry smile. This will long be remembered. The warmth with which he is viewed was reflected in a celebration of Bruce and his work convened at the National Library of Australia in October 2008. Always fit and a non-smoker, he was diagnosed with lung cancer only a few weeks later. He received proofs of his latest book, on Australian spies and novelists, only days before his death. Despite great suffering, to the end he never lost his sense of humour.

Bruce Bennett is survived by his wife Patricia, their twin children Catherine and Michael and their partners James and Serena, grandchildren Natasha and Lara, his brothers Jack and Glen and their families, and by many admirers around the globe. The next editions of *Westerly* and of the Spanish journal *Coolabah* will be dedicated to him, and both the University of New South

Wales (ADFA) and the Westerly Centre at UWA recently held celebrations in his honour.

**Dennis Haskell**  
**University of Western Australia**