

## In Memoriam: Syd Harrex (1935-2015)



Syd Harrex giving a talk at Flinders University

Coincidences have meaning only in retrospect (or do we impose one once we're at some distance from them?). I went to (South) Australia in 2007 to earn my sixth academic qualification (in the form of a PhD); the same year Syd (Harrex) published his sixth volume of poetry titled *Dougie's Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*. To encase my petty (and still-in-the-making) but Syd's impressive achievement in the frame of history, I may add that the year also marked India and Pakistan's sixtieth year of independence.

Naturally enough, it was India that brought Syd and me together (I wonder what else could have). The link happened to be Gillian (Dooley), the editor-in-chief of *Transnational Literature* (as far as I recall), who I should thank for inviting me to do a small presentation on some aspect of India. (At this point in time, however, I think I've every reason to suspect that it was *actually* Rick [Hosking], my PhD supervisor, who was pulling the strings from behind.) The occasion was the diamond jubilee of independence of the countries mentioned above. To mark the occasion, the Central Library at Flinders University (with the assistance of Unibooks) organised a discussion session to

be followed by a cultural programme. The discussion itself was organised under three broad heads: literature, religion and politics. The literature panel included Syd, Rick and Craig (Brittain), “the usual suspects,” as well as me. I was yet to become a “suspect,” though Rick, I’m pretty sure now, was vigorously at work to make me one as quickly as possible.

My talk was on Yeats on Rabindranath Tagore: I argued that Yeats misread the (colonial) context that produced *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*), the slim book of poetry that eventually won Tagore the Nobel in literature in 1913. Syd talked about how he fell in love with Indian literature in English, nostalgically reminiscing about the days he had spent in India. That was the first thing that drew me towards Syd: Syd’s love of India was what made me fall in love with him. During the refreshment break, Rick (or was it Gillian?) introduced me to Syd and a lasting friendship ensued. In the manner of an afterthought to my talk, Syd remarked: Yes, *Gitanjali*’s English translation was the only Indian literary text available in Australia at the time I set out to pursue my PhD in Indian English literature.

In 2007, when I began work on my PhD in the same area, the Central Library at Flinders along with the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide housed an impressive collection of literary and critical stuff on Indian English literature. I gradually came to know that the long row of wrought-iron cabinets holding South Asian literary and critical texts in the Central Library at Flinders was largely due to Syd and his like-minded successors. Syd hadn’t just earned his PhD in Indian English literature; he had also taken care that his passion for Indian and other literatures in English was shared by his students and colleagues at Flinders and other Australian universities. The establishment in 1977 of the Centre for Research in New Literatures in English (CRNLE) at Flinders with Syd as its founding Director speaks volumes for what Syd had done and would continue to do in the years to come to promote the study of the emerging literatures in English throughout Australia. As a precursor, Syd had trodden the path that I (and many others both before and after me) would tread later. I thus owe Syd a not-so-small debt.

It is no small satisfaction for me that I was part of the enterprise that eventually culminated in honouring Syd at Flinders. (Here too Rick was the Prospero; no postcolonial posturing intended.) It all originated from a conference held in Kangaroo Island in December 2009. The papers presented at the conference were to be published as a book. To my utter surprise, I found myself chosen as a member of the editorial team in charge of the publication (Prospero’s magic!). Before submitting the final manuscript to the publisher, the team sat to discuss who to dedicate the book. The unanimous choice was Syd. I was granted the extraordinary privilege to select some lines from Syd’s poetry that would go with the dedication. It is at that time that I discovered what a powerful poet Syd is. The book finally came out in 2012 titled *The Shadow of the*

*Precursor.* At the launching ceremony, Syd was given a copy of the book which he accepted with tears in his eyes. I was lucky to have been present at the ceremony. Like most present there, I felt humbled under Syd's long precursory shadow and at the same time honoured to be part of the whole affair meant to honour an academic who had taught a whole generation of students that it was possible to build a bridge between disparate cultures and that love of literature could still be an effective antidote to the divisive politics of what goes by the name of nationalism.

I have deliberately chosen a not-so-serious style for writing this tribute to Syd. If I've learnt one thing from Australian culture in general and my Aussie friends (at Flinders) in particular, it is that death should not be seen as a tragic event and that it should rather be seen as crowning a life lived to its full potential (unless it's a premature death). Syd is gone; but we do have solid reasons to celebrate the full life that he lived as a teacher, colleague, mentor, critic, friend and poet. A tribute to Syd befits him only if it ends on a regenerative, if not exactly celebratory, note:

Syd has left us some precious seeds;  
let us know if you ever need  
them; they are absolutely free;  
just make sure they grow into trees.

**Md. Rezaul Haque**  
**Islamic University, Kushtia, Bangladesh**