

A Belated Thank You



Dr. Syd Harrex (1935-2015)

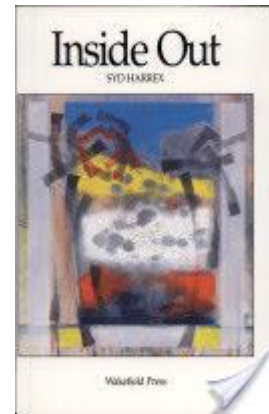
Syd Harrex founded the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English (CRNLE) in 1977, twelve years before three other Australian academics co-authored *The Empire Writes Back*, and at least a decade before non-Western scholars like Gayatri Spivak endowed the reading practice of “postcolonial studies” with the frisson of hot theory. Syd’s mission in 1977 was to place non-UK and non-USA writing in English into the critical purview of university curricular; to make visible what has later been called Anglophone literature, or World Literature in English, or postcolonial writing or global English literature – works coming

out of India, Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, Australia and much of Southeast Asia. As one of his titles noted, “Some take wing sooner than others” (CRNLE 2001); and Syd was concretely what too stereotypically has been labelled a “pioneer,” who braves the perils of institutional disdain and academic marginalisation to achieve a goal dimly glimpsed by most, a goal later to be taken over by others to higher success. We all stand on the shoulders of giants, except of course we also all too often forget to thank them for bearing the load. So this little essay is my way of saying thank you, knowing that somewhere the Spirit Reader will access it.

I first met Syd at a conference in Singapore; in fact, I suspect that conferences were where he met almost everyone whom he later published in the *CRNLE Reviews Journal* where writers and scholars even more marginalised that he found a home. I recall a tall, broad-shouldered, deep-chested red-faced shaggy-haired male with a broad Australian drawl, continuously dipping his head down to listen to me, all the while repeating, “Yeahhhh, yeahhh.” He was sweaty in humid Singapore, loved a cold beer, read his poems with passion, attended the panels and was most engaged about the literature when talking in the corridors.

My last meeting with Syd was in 1994. Syd, using the influence he had won at Flinders University and, through CRNLE, in Australia, persuaded the US State Department to offer me a United States Information Agency Academic Specialization Grant to fund two weeks of talks and papers delivered at Flinders University and the University of Adelaide, AND to attend an

international conference sponsored by CRNLE and Flinders University on some topic I vaguely remember as “postcolonial”-related. At least, that would explain the presence there also of Aijaz Ahmad, Bill Ashcroft and a bunch of other high-profile Australian scholars such as Paul Sharrad. Like Syd, I have attended many conferences, but HIS was memorable, first because Aijaz Ahmad had his computer stolen at the Hong Kong airport layover and could not give his opening keynote as he had to reconstruct it from memory for all of the first day of the conference, and I had to step up to read my paper as the keynote, which it was never intended to be; second, because my paper attempted a mild critique to *The Empire Writes Back*, which to my extreme mortification annoyed one of the three authors sitting at the back of the hall; third, because Lloyd Fernando, THE Professor in my undergraduate days at the University of Malaya, and recovered from a stroke, was delightfully present; and because in the free time available, I enjoyed a one-day vacation touring the Barossa Valley – the wine country of South Australia – in the company of two of Malaysia’s finest writers, Wong Phui Nam and Kee Thuan Chye. I had never till then, and never again, revelled in the sense of being a Malaysian writer among other Malaysian writers; glimpsed what it might have been to have the life-long pleasure of a habitus among one’s own national kin, such as I imagine writers like William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney were privy to (but which James Joyce forfeited in his escape from Ireland). I knew that I owed this one heralded experience to Syd, but I did not thank him enough.



It took me a little time to realise during my two weeks managed by Syd’s CRNLE colleagues that the *CRNLE Reviews Journal*, published first in 1979 to offer timely reviews on New Literatures in English, then expanding to serve as a critical analysis of these new texts, was changing direction in that year. 1996, I believe, also marked Syd’s transition out of the major administrative position he held at CRNLE, but it also marked his moving ahead to other loves; his wife and child, his days up in the lovely home among the Adelaide Hills, and his poetic vocation. Among Australia’s fine scholars, many have been and are international figures, their continent-island home unable to contain their explorers’ intellects; but only a few, such as Syd and Dennis Haskell, have been poet-scholars. Syd Harrex set aside his Muse to further his discipline, his institution, his colleagues and the many global labourers in the fields of writing and teaching who he believed deserved recognition. As one of those labouring in these fields, I am grateful that he did after all find the time for his poems (some included in *The Oxford Book of Modern Australian Verse*, 1996), leaving Australia and us six volumes of poetry, most recently *Five Seasons* (Adelaide,

Table One Press, 2011). As Shakespeare understood centuries earlier, “So long... as... eyes can see, so long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (Sonnet 18). Thank you, Syd, for your poetry and for your brave journeys into the lesser-known literary terrains.

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