

## Memories of Syd Harrex

My arrival in 2009 at Penneshaw, Kangaroo Island for the by then renowned annual conference, marked not only a unique meeting of two islanders (from



Syd Harrex (middle) with Graham Tulloch and Melinda Graefe

Tasmania and New Zealand's North Island) on a much smaller island, but also the last one in a long friendship.

The recognitions that were jarred by Jamesian shocks in 2009 came from my earlier knowledge of Syd Harrex in London, where our paths first crossed at the Commonwealth Writers Prize Awards in 1985.

The Poetry Prize that year was won by New Zealand poet, Lauris Edmond, and Syd was the judge of the Pacific Region. That night inaugurated for me friendships both with Lauris, lasting until her death in 2000, and the inimitable Syd.

From the first he aimed to show me something of what he could see, his world of the 'Other' Literatures in English (too soon for Postcolonial Studies). The vision was partly associated with his role as Director of CRNLE in Flinders University, the promotion of writers like the Indian poet, Kamala Das, and it extended to his many friends, colleagues and ex-students, some of whom, like Jamie Scott, Sudesh Mishra, Russell McDougall, Rob Sellick, Ken Arvidson, and Brian Matthews, I met over the years. It was represented on an international scale by ACLALS and the pioneering work of Anna Rutherford, and more creatively by Syd's own poetry as in his collection *Atlantis and Other Islands*. This showed his mind's range as he conjoined and intersected observations and thoughts, the comic or incidental, with multiple literary legacies, often acknowledging island spaces in location to mainlands, and the expanse of the sea between. I then had a newly minted doctorate from Oxford and worked in medieval literature, little guessing that within a decade I would cross the disciplinary divide and enter the world to which Syd's showings beckoned.

My re-education took many byways and pathways. London led to Ireland, Paris and Salzburg in the 1980s, to Oviedo, and Tübingen in the 1990s, to Canberra, Aachen and Hyderabad in the 2000s and then returned to London

when Syd made a final trip in the summer of 2006. It was conducted around conferences, dinners, conversations, and encounters with writers and academics. At the same time that CRNLE was celebrating little known writers of South East Asia and the Pacific, British culture was being transformed by the impact of the Asian and African diasporas, as found in the novels and cinema of Hanif Kureishi. With humour, transnational currents and some official enthusiasm a new path was being carved out. David Dabydeen was a friend, for example, who verbally jostled with Syd over the difference between winning the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry (David) and being runner-up (Syd). Only much later after I began teaching postcolonial writing in the UK, did I realise how such prizes were creating space for an alternative literary canon, that in those days before the institutionalisation of postcolonial studies and the founding of journals like *Wasafiri* had only limited recognition.

Syd remained to the end grounded in his native soil. But he was constantly crossing horizons real and imagined, intuitively charting little known territory, rediscovering writers like Lee Kok Liang or exposing hoaxes like the Ern O'Malley Hoax or suspecting the Demidenko one. I recall his droll drawl, the sound of the incorrigible raconteur, his blue eyes and thatch of white hair. On the last day at Penneshaw after saying goodbye, then finding I was booked on a later bus, I returned to the table I had just left, where he was sitting with John McLaren and others. He exploded with surprised delight at my reappearance and the precious minutes gained by the delay. It was a moment to be savoured.

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