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AUSTRALIA

**Kunapipi**

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Volume 27 | Issue 1

Article 3

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2005

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#### Recommended Citation

Niven, Alastair, J.N Jeffares, *Kunapipi*, 27(1), 2005.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol27/iss1/3>

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J.N Jeffares

**Abstract**

We have all experienced it. Someone we hugely admire because of their inexhaustible energy or their creative talent dies, and it is as though night had fallen in the afternoon. It is simply not possible that this person has gone. Yes, they were nearly 85, but they seemed so young, so positive, and they still had so much to give.

# A.N. Jeffares

11 August 1920 — 1 June 2005

We have all experienced it. Someone we hugely admire because of their inexhaustible energy or their creative talent dies, and it is as though night had fallen in the afternoon. It is simply not possible that this person has gone. Yes, they were nearly 85, but they seemed so young, so positive, and they still had so much to give.

Thus it was for his friends, former colleagues, former students, and countless associates in a wide spectrum of the literary world when they heard that Derry Jeffares had died. Died characteristically, of course, if one can have a characteristic death. He had been entertaining on a fine early summer afternoon in the garden of his home at Fife Ness, Scotland's most easterly point where it reaches out towards the continent and the wider world. He retired to bed. The next morning his wife could not wake him. He had slipped out of the world as though it was the most natural thing to do at that moment. That was how he lived his life. Everything seemed right when Derry did it, even when he was asking you to do the impossible — to write a book in six weeks, change your academic specialism because he thought you were in too crowded a field, take a post in Ouagadougou, claim tax relief on the garden shed because you might use it as a study.

I met Alexander Norman Jeffares for the first time in 1967. I was a postgraduate student at the University of Ghana and Derry, as we all were invited to address him from the start (had I at that stage and in that era ever called a professor by his first name, let alone a diminutive?), arrived in June as our external examiner. Douglas Dunn, head of the Department of English, assigned me to look after the visiting dignitary. This meant accompanying him to the sea in order just to talk and to listen. Derry was a brilliant talker and, though a brisk listener verging on the impatient, he had a knack of ferreting out the nugget of information he needed. In my case he wanted to know what I intended to do after I finished my modest M.A. and my limited teaching. 'You must do a Ph.D. and have a lectureship in the School of English!' he announced, within what seemed minutes of spreading our towels on Labadi Beach.

And so I did. Few people gainsaid Derry Jeffares when he had a plan in his mind. Like many academics of my generation, we owed everything at the beginning to him. He would snap people up wherever he visited, commission a first book from them, get them a post somewhere, and by a combination of stick and carrot would groom them for what he hoped would be a splendid university career. It was a style which could not survive this era of equal opportunities and I am sure that those who disapproved of it did so with good reason. Notable among them was his colleague at Leeds, Arnold Kettle, who was not only an outstanding critic of Victorian fiction and a brilliant teacher, but also Vice-President of the British Communist Party. They had more in common than they

admitted, both being *bon viveurs*, but their mutual antipathy was because they represented different points on the politico-economic spectrum. Derry was an *entrepreneur*, a capitalist and a lover of private initiatives, Arnold a believer in conforming to social and moral principles derived from a passionate belief in the equality of human beings. But in some ways they mistook each other. Both of them utterly lacked in class prejudice. At Derry's dinner table to the end of his life you might find Seamus Heaney and the local garage mechanic, a specialist in alternative medicines and a publishing baron, an eminent novelist and a farmer's wife. It was the same in the Kettle household. And both loved wine.

By the time I met Derry he was already a legendary figure. He had done pioneering work on the life and poetry of W.B. Yeats, his compatriot. *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet* by A. Norman Jeffares was published in 1948 and was the key work on its subject for the next thirty years. As a schoolboy Derry had persuaded Yeats to contribute a poem to the school magazine. It was the start of a life-long passion for Anglo-Irish literature. If Yeats was the epicentre of this, so many others featured too. In 2000 he produced a definitive edition of the poetry and plays of Oliver St. John Gogarty. Congreve, Swift, Goldsmith, Maria Edgeworth, and many others passed before his editorial gaze.

Derry's academic trajectory was unconventionally broad for a man of his time. After taking his first degrees at Trinity College, Dublin, he moved to Oxford and studied for a second doctorate there. His first lectureship was at the University of Groningen, 1946 to 1948. Whilst there, he married Jeanne Calembert, who was of Belgian origin, though they had met in Glasgow. With their daughter Bo, they moved from Holland to Edinburgh. After three years he was given his first chair, the Jury Professorship of English at the University of Adelaide. It was there that he discovered new Australian writing, as well as classic authors such as Henry Handel Richardson, whom he particularly admired. This was to be the basis of his pioneering concern for new literatures in English from all round the world, though his devotion to Irish writing remained pre-eminent.

The big chance came with his appointment in 1957 to the chair of English at the University of Leeds. At a stroke he was in a formidable position to influence English studies as profoundly as his Shakespearean predecessor, G. Wilson Knight, had done. Derry brought literature and language teaching together within a newly constituted School of English. Scholars and students came to the School from all round the world, especially from the emerging academes of Africa and India. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *Ariel* began life at Leeds. The first international conference on Commonwealth literature took place under his auspices in 1964 and led to the setting-up of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.

I joined the School in 1969, registered by then for a Ph.D. under Derry's supervision. I was awed by his beneficence. I had been offered a starting salary of £1,200 a year, with which I was rather pleased. A few days before I began, I

received a letter out of the blue increasing it to £1,400. As I was about to be married, I could not believe this unsolicited largesse, but it was typical of his view that if you started generously you would avoid grudges and win allies. Sometimes, however, he was deliberately provocative, if he thought it might shake complacency, which he disliked above all things. I recall a staff meeting in my first term at which all the senior teachers, among them the poet Geoffrey Hill, were asked to switch their courses round. 'But I have always taught Victorian poetry!' came the inevitable squeal (not from Hill, I hasten to say). 'Precisely,' said Professor Jeffares. 'That's the problem. I would like you to do seventeenth-century prose this term.'

Academic leadership of this kind was criticised, but Derry had little time for whingers. He felt that many university teachers were quite lazy, had often not thought about their discipline for many years, and were financial illiterates. He not only had them teaching in areas they barely knew existed, but he would commission text-books and critical studies from them by the dozen. Thus was born *York Notes*, the series originally planned for Middle Eastern undergraduates but later becoming global. Academics began to clamber to write one of these, realising that the sales very often paid for their summer holidays. My own on *Lord of the Flies* generated more income than anything else I have written, though it has to be admitted that sales depended not on the quality of the *critique* but on the frequency with which the text being discussed was taught. It became a stock remark that Derry would commission the office cat to write a study guide in the series if one was needed urgently.

This might imply that he had no standards. It is not true, but he could not be bothered with pomposity, and he felt he saw a lot of it in the university and publishing worlds. He was in fact the most meticulous editor, with an uncanny gift of reading rapidly, writing long marginal annotations, chatting vociferously, and sipping wine all at the same time. He answered correspondence by return and read every word one sent to him for comment.

In 1974 Derry Jeffares surprised everyone but his family by moving back to Scotland. He took a chair at the University of Stirling, where by now I was also teaching. Few could understand why he had given up so prominent a chair for a post in a university scarcely five years old. It was assumed that he had become bored with senior administration and that he wanted a more tranquil setting in which to pursue his scholarship. All this was true. Though his home in Leeds had been delightful, decorated as it was with wall paintings by Quentin Bell and more recently by his artist daughter, the various homes that followed in Fife had wonderful pastoral beauty and tranquillity. Here he could indulge his love of building walls, have his old cars safely installed in the out-houses, and give Jeanne space for her pottery and surroundings conducive to her flair for spirit healing.

But I suspect there was another reason to go to Stirling, which none of his obituarists have noted. He wanted to help the university re-position itself. Stirling

had recently undergone a public humiliation when a visit by The Queen provoked unprecedented demonstrations of the type that had been associated only with radicals in France. The survival of the university was at stake. Derry had been a friend of Tom Cottrell, the first Principal, who had died at the age of 49 under the strain of what had happened. Without drawing attention to this motive, Derry knew that a professor of his national standing arriving in Stirling when its fortunes were at their lowest ebb would help save it.

From time to time Derry Jeffares would take on an advisory role, for example by serving successfully as the chairman of the literature panel of the Scottish Arts Council. He continued to travel widely until well in to his seventies. His publications — books, editions, articles, and latterly many poems — flowed ceaselessly. He returned a set of proofs on the day of his death. His was an inexhaustible energy. It flowed from a heart that relished humanity. He could be droll, uncharitable and dismissive in his opinion of people, but he somehow got away with it, because his comments were always made so charmingly, and with such wit.

On the day of his funeral I was asked to hold one of the cords as the coffin was lowered in to the grave. I had never done that before and I held on like — well, like grim death. The undertaker had to give me a succinct lesson in the laws of gravity. As it was lowered I felt such a sense of love for the man and so great a sense of the honour in being asked to hold that little thread of connection. I feel the same in being asked to write about him now. I, and many of my generation, owe our professional beginnings to him. Even though he was a giant in the story of English Studies in the twentieth-century, his influence in Anglo-Irish literary research and his historic instigation of post-colonial discourse will eventually fade in importance. However, as long as there are people alive who recall him, his presence will remain, for we are unlikely ever to know a man combining so rich a spirit with so practical a manner of expressing it.

Alastair Niven