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Journals, Conference Reports

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Journals, Conference Reports

Abstract
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The decision to recommence publication of *Australian Book Review* is one which will be welcomed by all and will prove a valuable, if not indispensable, guide to all persons and institutions interested in Australian studies.

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ECHOS DU COMMONWEALTH

Issue No. 4 is a special issue on Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*. It includes the following essays:

Robert Mane, 'The Grass is Singing: Pourquoi ce roman?'
Bruce King, 'Doris Lessing's Africa'
Jacqueline Bardolph, 'Woman and the World of Things: a reading of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*'
Jacques Leclaire, 'The Grass is Singing: roman de la désintégration'
Jean-Pierre Durix, 'Fragmentation in Doris Lessing’s The Grass is Singing
Jean Sivry, 'Nouvelles de la Société'

Available from Professor R. Mane, Department of English, University of Pau, France.

Conference Reports

Seminar on Modern African Literature, held at Vingsted conference centre, Denmark, 15-17 March 1978.

The course was funded by the Danish association of English Teachers in secondary schools and organized and run by members of staff of the Commonwealth Institute at Aarhus University. There was a maximum attendance of 40 delegates and the course was fully booked up.

As the reading list shows lectures were organized according to subject matter. This was done to accommodate the prevailing teaching method in Danish grammar schools which centres around projects; each of the subject headings on the reading list could form such a 'project'. The reading list had been sent out prior to the course, and a book mailing service arranged through the university bookshop so that delegates could read the texts – or some of them – before the actual course took place. The time table was crowded, and the conference was very much a working conference. Apart from lectures on the subjects on the reading list given by Anna Rutherford and Kirsten Holst Petersen, there was a lecture on the political situation in Africa with special
reference to Tanzania, given by Sven Poulsen, a journalist and author of several books about Africa, and a lecture on African Art, given by Torben Lundbæk from the Department of Ethnography at the National Museum in Copenhagen.

On the entertainment side there was an exhibition of African sculpture and masks, an exhibition of cloth paintings by the Nigerian artist Michael Adeyole, a book exhibition and a playreading of Soyinka’s *The Lion and the Jewel* by students and members of staff at the Department of English, Aarhus University. Several British publishers (Longmans, Evans, Macmillans, Oxford University Press) had contributed to the exhibition, and every book on an African subject which the university bookshop had in stock was brought along – and they were all sold; in fact there was competition for some of them.

The seriousness and enthusiasm of the delegates made it clear that much of the material dealt with during the conference would be ploughed straight back into teaching in secondary schools, and letters of inquiry about texts, secondary literature etc. which I have received since have confirmed this impression.

KIRSTEN HOLST PETERSEN

Reading list for lectures and discussion groups:

THE CULTURE CLASH
Bitek, *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*
Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
Ham Mukasa, *Sir Appopo Discovers London*
Soyinka, *The Lion and the Jewell*
Selected poems

CARGO CULT
Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*
Armah, *Fragments*
Ama Ata Aidoo, *The Dilemma of a Ghost*

WARS OF LIBERATION
Ngugi, *Weep Not Child*
Mwangi, *Carcase for Hounds*
Ngugi and Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*
Ngugi, *Secret Lives*
Selected poems

CORRUPTION

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The Grand Hotel Verdala in Rabat on the island of Malta could serve any third-world poet as an excellent symbol of colonialism. Set with cool indifference onto the highest point of the island, dominating and yet isolated from the dwellings and daily lives of the islanders, satisfied with its own rather creaky respectability (please dress up for dinner – tough mutton and over-boiled cabbage) which it supports with a burst of ‘culture’ (Victorian bar-room ballads – please be quiet and try to look pious) between the ever-so-swinging dances, it was the ideal setting for a conference on post-colonial literature. And the participants at the conference, when they were not in session denouncing the sins of imperial masters, certainly made the most of the swimming-pool, the comfortable lounges, and of course the bars.

Yes really, the ‘Verdala’ was an excellent setting: not only because of its ironic appropriateness and because of the way it showed up the blind spots of those participants who did not appreciate the irony, but also because it was an eminently practical solution to some bothersome practical problems. That one could confer formally and informally as well as eat sleep and relax, all under one roof, assisted the smooth running of the conference greatly. And it ran remarkably smoothly. An essential basis for this success was the unobtrusive yet untiring work of the organiser, Daniel Massa. To satisfy academics is a notoriously difficult task, yet here were sixty of these irascible souls, none of whom had anything but praise for Daniel’s handling of the innumerable large and small problems that cropped up. Naturally, there were many differences of opinion, and once or twice the discussions showed signs of becoming acrimonious, but that they never actually did so is in large part due to the civilised agreement on essentials which underlay the disagreements on details.

The less formal aspects of the conference have a special value of their own:
they permit a degree more freedom of speech than the formal discussions do— if only because one is not under the same pressure to keep to the point! But the suggestion, made by some senior members of the Association, that these informalities are the real business of the conference and that the presentation of papers should be reduced to a minimum is surely a serious error. It is in the formal sessions that the results of months, in some cases years, of research can be presented to an interested and critical public for examination and discussion, which in turn will stimulate the continuation and development of the research programs. It is also difficult to see how a conference on Commonwealth Literature could do justice to the fascinating range of the subject in a handful of papers. In terms of genres, style and other literary categories the range is perhaps less wide than one might naively imagine—there is, it seems to me, sufficient consistency in these matters to justify the term ‘Commonwealth Literature’, no matter how difficult it may be to define it. But in geographic terms the range is, of course, immense, and it was encouraging to see that no major English-speaking area was ignored by this ‘European’ conference.

Australia was represented by a strong contingent of guests, direct from down under, and several papers concerned themselves with Australian themes. June Factor (London) was able to show that the literary representation of the immigrant population in Australia is highly relevant to the major themes of the conference (not only ‘The Community and the Individual’, but also the relationship of majority and minority groups within the community). The liveliness of the discussion on the 1890s was especially striking and it is satisfying to see that the past is now being taken as seriously as the present. New Zealand, on the other hand, had to be satisfied with two half-papers, both of which must be passed over in silence.

Not every Australian present spoke about Australia. Indeed there are encouraging signs that people in many Commonwealth countries are becoming aware of the literary cultures of other post-colonial societies (but have we thought enough about our relationship to the literatures of Spanish, French and Portuguese ex-colonies?). Helen Tiffin (Queensland) spoke on West Indian writers; Gareth Griffiths (Macquarie) spoke cleverly about the ritual elements in Soyinka’s plays.

There was also a strong contingent of guests from Canada, most of whom did speak (very interestingly) about their own literature. On the other hand the European hosts found comparatively little to say about Australia and Canada, apart from a thoroughly researched paper on Joseph Furphy from Xavier Pons (Toulouse).

A set of coincidental clashes with other papers prevented me from hearing more than two of the papers on India, but this region was also very adequately covered.
But as things turned out the strongest geographical emphasis was laid on Africa. Of course the geographical division is not the only possible, nor perhaps the most important classification of the material discussed at the conference. Thematic categories are at least equally important: and the emphasis on Africa could be interpreted thematically, since the political and social problems reflected in African literature are also present — but perhaps less obviously — in all of the Commonwealth regions. The geographic emphasis on Africa could be seen, then, as a thematic emphasis on the question of justice and opportunity for individuals and for suppressed groups in various — frequently unstable — political and social systems. Some of the basic psychological and cross-cultural problems involved were clearly and rather frighteningly revealed by Berath Lindfors (Texas) in his paper on the presentation of African materials on the nineteenth century London stage. By looking back one hundred years, Lindfors was able to establish sufficient distance to present his picture of prejudice and good-willed misunderstanding without polemics, but he didn’t permit us the comfort of treating this material merely as ‘past history’ — he drew unusually perceptive parallels with popular culture in our own days, and set the more thoughtful listeners the problem of examining their own unconscious attitudes. Both for its scholarly range and for its moral force this was an unusually impressive paper.

In some respects the climax of the conference was reached at the session when three closely argued papers examined the extremely problematical relationship of political commitment and literary creation. I think of this as a climax because this theme was subliminally present in almost every paper presented, but at the session in question it came out clearly into the open. Dieter Riemenschneider (Frankfurt) posed the question of how an artist can simultaneously celebrate life and present anti-human forces in his work. This is a task faced by writers everywhere, but very acutely in South Africa. Riemenschneider demonstrated that Alex la Guma achieves this difficult balancing act by dealing with people who have been psychically damaged by racism, but presenting them through the medium of a subtly sensitive, highly conscious narrator.

Angus Calder (Scotland) presented a very different answer to the same basic question. In a highly informative talk on the often anthologised yet little-known Kenyan poet Jared Angira, he pointed out that a liberation of the imagination, provided that it is not merely an avoidance of but a conscious answer to political and social repression, can be an equally valid response for an author striving to preserve his individuality in a volatile and unpredictable society. The direct and literal representation of repression then becomes unnecessary.

In the third paper of the session, Jürgen Martini (Bremen) turned to a writer whose present situation demonstrates vividly the problem of the relationship of
a critical individual to his society: Ngugi wa Thiong’o. At its plenary session the conference passed a motion expressing its distress and the deep shock which Ngugi’s arrest has caused. Martini’s paper demonstrated yet again that the incorporation of political anger into the framework of a literary work creates difficulties and aesthetic tensions, which Ngugi has boldly faced.

It is unfortunately impossible to comment on all the papers (and would be, even if it had been possible to hear them all). But one group of papers does deserve special mention – those of our Maltese hosts. In spite of the interesting summaries presented at earlier conferences, and published in their proceedings, few of us have concerned ourselves seriously with Maltese writing. We shall have to do so in the future, for it is clear that there are poets, novelists and critics of considerable talent living on that small but culturally rich island, and they have something important to tell us about their own variation on the human condition.

I am sadly conscious of having left out much of value in this very personal account, the publication of the proceedings will do something to help, but those of us who were on the spot will carry a mass of pleasant and enriching memories with us. Malta the island, with its curiously rugged beauty, Malta the cultural centre, with its writers and personalities, and Malta the hospitable conference venue have made an imprint on Commonwealth studies which will be felt for many years to come.

NELSON WATTIE


The inclusion in the subtitle of both criticism and teaching accounts for the importance and success of the conference as well as for its problems and difficulties. The conference was well attended (approx. one hundred and forty five delegates) and they fell into two groups: (a) critics and academics, (b) teachers from a variety of educational institutions, including technical colleges, adult education centres and comprehensive schools. The programme was divided between criticism and teaching with a clear emphasis on the latter, and during the conference the problems of getting African and Caribbean literature onto the school syllabus and teaching it in a classroom context emerged as the main
theme.

There is, perhaps, a danger in mixing two subjects at a conference like this; due to the fact that the speakers from either group knew that part of the audience was unfamiliar with their subject they tended to make their speeches of an introductory nature with the result that the ones who did know something about it did not learn as much as they could have done. However, there were also benefits to be shared by either group.

The panel discussing 'resources and publications' was an obvious one. Michael Foster gave a valuable insight into the work done at the Commonwealth Institute library to facilitate the distribution of African and Caribbean literature, Eric Huntley spoke about the New Beacon publishing firm and bookshop which concentrates on African and Caribbean literature, and James Currey gave us the history and future plans for Heinemann's African Writers Series. It was interesting to notice that after James Currey's speech the representatives of Macmillans, Rex Collings and Nelsons who were sitting in the audience jumped to their feet and gave details of their contributions to the publishing of African and Caribbean literature. Evidently, competition is fierce in this field.

Another shared benefit was the very enjoyable poetry reading by Dennis Brutus, John Agard and James Berry and the lecture by Chinua Achebe. The last mentioned spoke about the role of the modern writer in Africa whom he saw as 'instructor of mankind', a role he has inherited from the oral literature. Achebe asserted that because of this direct link with oral literature which was collective and therefore committed the modern African writer has a greater commitment to his society than his European contemporary.

At the panel discussion which followed Chinua Achebe's speech Professor Kinkead-Weekes gave the reasons why he thought that African and Caribbean literature should be taught. He supported his argument by analyses of extracts of texts handed out beforehand. Rhonda Cobham stressed the need for knowing the social background to West Indian literature in order to be able to appreciate it. Mary van de Water gave an exceedingly amusing account of her first experience of teaching African literature in the classroom. Apart from her wit she would seem to be the only person at the conference who had any practical experience of what we were all talking about: teaching these new literatures to school children. She was a member of a group of school teachers in Edinburgh who, on their own initiative, had taught African and Caribbean literature in their schools. In addition to this they also held weekly meetings about their experiences and published their findings in pamphlet form. Such grassroot activities must surely be the genuine beginning of a change, rather than directives from above.

Dipak Nandi from the Equal Opportunities Commission frankly admitted
that he had never taught African or Caribbean literature, but his contribution was nevertheless the most interesting one during the conference, not just because it was the most astringent and well organised, but also because it aroused a certain amount of controversy. After tracing the genesis of black studies Dipak Nandi suggested that there had been an over-emphasis on the past with a tendency to ‘wallow in the misery of subjugation’, which he called the ‘moans and groans school of history’. He then suggested that black people should ‘compete in the arena of real power’ – in other words, forget about the past and get on with the present; become doctors and lawyers and get themselves onto influential boards and committees, and people will respect them. This is of course true, but Nandi’s – no doubt realistic – acceptance of hard capitalist values offended some, in particular Lewis Nkosi who saw colonialism and imperialism as the root of most evils. One could also object that not every black man can compete in ‘the arena of real power’ and surely respect is also due to those outside it. In this connection one could mention Lewis Nkosi’s contention that the introduction of black studies in schools would help to awaken the consciousness of the British working classes because they would realize – by analogy – that they were also discriminated against.

A little closer to the practical reality was Russell Profit, the Deputy Head of Depford Primary School, who spoke of his involvement in introducing black studies in his school, and Raymond Giles, Professor of Education at Massachusetts, who gave an amusing as well as informative account of the development of black studies in America.

The final session not surprisingly dealing with the topic ‘planning for the future’ had a very concrete result. A committee was elected, consisting of L. Garrison, Director of ACER, London; Dr Innes of Kent University; Alastair Niven, director of the Africa Centre in London; and Lewis Nkosi. Their initial task will be to contact teachers who might be interested in teaching black studies and set up and act as co-ordinators between regional groups who might wish to organize themselves along the lines of the Edinburgh group. Such a practical result is the logical outcome of what was very much a working conference, and the organizer, Dr Innes, is to be congratulated for having contributed towards the furtherance of African and Caribbean studies in such a positive and practical way.

Kirsten Holst Petersen