

Perspective

Editor's Note: A. Norman Jeffares responds here to Tim Watson's article "Is the 'Post' in Postcolonial the US in American Studies? The US Beginnings of Commonwealth Studies," in *ARIEL's* special issue on "Institutionalizing English Studies: The Postcolonial/Postindependence Challenge," Volume 31, Numbers 1 & 2, January-April 2000, pages 51-72.

Elementary, My Dear Watson

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IT IS AMUSING to see what political mythology makes of earlier events. I am not fully sure what is bothering Dr. Watson but a lot of what he writes is nonsense. He is imputing political motives where they did not exist. What a pity he did not realize I am still alive and could, if asked, have told him how it really was. In commenting on some of his allegations, I must run the risk of being unashamedly autobiographical in order to replace his fiction with some facts.

When I was invited to the University of Leeds with the suggestion that I might consider accepting the Headship of the Department of English Literature there (at the time I was on study leave from the Jury Chair at the University of Adelaide, South Australia, researching in English and Irish libraries, and had had no intention of leaving Adelaide), I was asked at an informal meeting of senior academics and Council members what I thought of English Studies in the UK. I replied that there were, it seemed to me, many serious gaps in what was taught and researched. There was, for instance, no chair of American Literature in the UK and no chair of Modern English Language; there was no study of Commonwealth Literature (though Commonwealth History was not ignored), nor was there any teaching of Folk Life Studies. I was then asked if I would want to develop these subjects if I came to Leeds and I replied that I would. That was in late spring 1956, and I

abandoned my study leave to return to teach in Adelaide, subsequently arriving in Leeds in February 1957.

I was horrified to find that only one post had been allocated to English in the 1956 quinquennial plan, and told the Vice-Chancellor (that wonderful man, Sir Charles Morris) that I did not want to wait for five years to develop my plans to remedy the lacks I saw in UK Departments of English and that I would probably take up the offer of a very lucrative post in the US. He said he fully understood my feelings but would I perhaps first try to get outside funding for any of the developments I had in mind. If I did succeed in this, he said, he would carry any posts so funded on the University's budget in the next quinquennium so that I would only need to find five or four years' funding. Where could one find money for chairs, for lectureships, for fellowships? I had to find out quickly.

I made Commonwealth Literature one of my first priorities. Why? For personal reasons. When I was a lecturer in the University of Edinburgh, Professor Renwick set me to supervise a PhD thesis on the History of New Zealand Literature, being written by a New Zealander. I read a good deal of New Zealand writing with interest and pleasure. Then when I arrived in Adelaide in 1951, I set myself to reading Australian literature. (In 1953, at the request of the editor, I wrote a long article on its history and development for *Etudes Anglaises*.) I found so much good writing to enjoy, so much varied vicarious experience to assimilate. It was one of the ways of settling into Australian life, itself so enjoyable.

Then I began to wonder whether there were parallels between Australian writing and Canadian, both countries colonized in different ways. I managed to get funds to send one of the lecturers, Brian Elliott, who was well versed in Australian Literature (on which subsequently he wrote with distinction), to Canada. The funds came from the Carnegie Corporation, Steve Stackpole, one of their senior administrators, an enlightened man, seeing the point of this. Brian spent six months in Canada acquiring a good working knowledge of Canadian Literature and meeting many Canadian writers and academics. He became a devotee, and on his return to Adelaide gave excellent seminars to staff and some senior students on Canadian Literature. We reinforced his

work with a visit from Claude Bissell, then a Professor and later President of the University of Toronto. In effect, we had begun the fruitful Canadian-Australian Academic Exchange Committee. The comparative basis of Brian's work was enhanced when I got him a Rockefeller grant that enabled him to spend two years in the US to read American Literature, to travel widely, to meet academics and writers and to work in various US university libraries.

Getting funds from Carnegie and Rockefeller in Australia (both corporations were later very generous in helping to fund the setting up of the Australian Humanities Research Council, now the Australian Academy of the Humanities — but that is another story not without unexpected occurrences, which I shall describe elsewhere) had needed much persuasion and pertinacity, but where could one go in the UK?

My first tentative approaches to various UK bodies were greeted with the answer that they had no funds to support academic posts, which were the responsibility of the universities, funded by the University Grants Committee. I decided to put up a scheme to the British Council for an annual visiting Fellowship in Commonwealth Literature, having got the University to promise to make a token contribution of a small amount of funding to cover some travel in the UK, office expenses, and incidentals. I argued that the Council should see it was to its advantage that scholars and writers would be made part of a Department's work, teaching an MA course. We proposed having a Fellow from a different commonwealth country each year. He or she would send a reading list in October and come to Leeds in January to teach their literature to staff and students (some undergraduates were occasionally allowed to attend). We would encourage the Fellows to visit other UK universities. The Council would pay their traveling expenses from their own countries to and from Leeds, and pay their salaries for the period of the quinquennium, after which the university would take this over.

Luckily there were members of the British Council who saw merit in the idea. Arthur King, for instance, who was a scholarly bureaucrat with a Swedish doctorate and a lively interest in English Language and Shakespeare, was one and, especially, Norman Williams (who persuaded me to spend three months

in India lecturing in various universities there), who, like King, had experience of the subcontinent, read Indian and Pakistani writers in English and knew many of them personally.

The Fellowships worked well. They were not funded, as Dr. Watson states, by the British Government's Commonwealth Relations Office and should not be seen (he says "must be seen"[59]) in the context of, and in competition with, the US State Department and US Information Service funding for American Studies programs in the UK in the 1950s. This is political theorizing some thirty-six years after the 1964 Leeds Conference complained of in Dr. Watson's article. The first of our Fellows, Professor Srinivasa Iyengar, who came to Leeds from Andhra University, India, in 1957, returned to attend the Commonwealth Literature Conference held at Leeds in 1964. The Fellowships were supported by generous gifts of books from overseas, from, for instance, the Sahitya Academy in India. New Zealand's government was particularly helpful in this respect. We had Fellows who were academics, others who were creative writers and some who were both. They stimulated many students (some of whom visited or worked in the countries whose literature they had studied in Leeds), made many friendships in the UK and, I think, enjoyed their stay in what was an exciting intellectual environment. I must emphasize that they were created out of an intellectual interest, not a political purpose. Unfortunately, the University eventually gave up funding them. It did, however, establish, from its own funds, the first chair in Commonwealth Literature, Lord Boyle, recently arrived as Vice Chancellor, supporting the request of the School of English for this post. William Walsh was its first occupant; he moved to it from his chair in Education, and his Douglas Grant Fellowship in Commonwealth Literature in the School of English (set up to commemorate Douglas Grant, who died tragically and unexpectedly at the early age of forty seven), having developed a keen interest in the subject. He wrote several books on Commonwealth Literature and visited many Commonwealth countries in pursuit of this interest.

Partially because of Dr. Watson's apparent suggestions that I and my colleagues were anti-American, I should point out that I

pursued funds to set up a chair of American Literature strenuously. These efforts led me to Carl Bode, a Professor at the University of Maryland, then US Cultural attache in London, who skillfully produced funds for the first years of this chair, the first to be established in the UK. (Was it from the Wheat Loan? I am not sure of the mechanics involved, but they worked.) To it we appointed Douglas Grant, then a Professor in the University of Toronto, who was also deeply interested in Canadian Literature; his normal teaching was in eighteenth-century English Literature. (He too attended the 1964 conference.) Our example was followed by the University of Manchester and other universities in the UK. We managed to persuade a British foundation to fund the setting up of the Bruern Fellowship, which brought American scholars to the School of English in Leeds for two years while they taught, *inter alia*, some American history and politics as well as literature.

Incidentally, we did establish the first UK chair of Modern English Language. Its second holder, Terence Mitchell, attended the Leeds 1964 conference; among his other interests was the Berber language. Folk Life Studies came later with the establishment of an Institute run by Stewart Sanderson. There were other developments: an Institute of Bibliographical Studies and an Institute of Modern English Language. The School of English had four printing presses, a recording studio and even a TV studio. Leeds was in expansive mood in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

To our first conference, then: the “exclusion of the US from this overseas market” (a curious phrase — what market?) is, Dr Watson says, “remarkable” (55). Why? Those of us in Leeds who called the conference into being were well aware of Alan McLeod’s book, *The Commonwealth Pen*, of Bruce Sutherland’s course at Penn State College, and of the work of Joseph Jones in assembling a large collection of Commonwealth writing in Texas and in issuing his *Newsletter* (Jones visited Leeds once or twice and later attended at least one ACLALS conference; more of that organization later). In 1964, however, we were not setting up an international conference. It was a conference on Commonwealth Literature, planned as a *Commonwealth Conference*, largely experimental, to see what response we would get.

Sixty-eight people attended, ten of them members of the staff of the University of Leeds (four were still graduate students at Leeds who had posts overseas). Of the fifty-eight, many were academics from Commonwealth countries who were in the UK at the time. We invited several publishers who were interested in the subject: Dan Davin of the Oxford University Press, a well-known New Zealand writer; Keith Sambrook of Heinemann Educational Books, the UK firm (of which he was Overseas Director) which did so much to spot, encourage and publish African writers; and Clifford Simmonds of the National Book League. Robin Myers of that organization, a non-political body, and its Director, Jack Morpurgo, were also present. We also asked others whom we knew to be interested in Commonwealth Literature: Douglas Cleverdon of the BBC, J.W.M. Willett of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Eric White, Literature Director of the Arts Council of Great Britain, and Miss Olds of the Central Office of Information.

Where the British Council came into it was that we managed to persuade them to fund the travel from Commonwealth countries of some members of the conference — arguing that it was a natural follow-up of their funding the Leeds Fellowships in Commonwealth Literature. We wanted writers at it, and we were fortunate to have among others Chinua Achebe, Edmund Blunden, Lloyd Fernando, Tony Harrison, Eldred Jones, Brendan Kennelly, Henry Kreisel, George Lamming, John Press, and Khushwant Singh.

We were delighted to have John Press from the British Council, not least because he agreed to edit a selection of the papers delivered or tabled at the conference. Keith Sambrook agreed to publish this book, *Commonwealth Literature* (1965), under the Heinemann Educational Books imprint. When we got funding for the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, so ably edited by Arthur Ravenscroft, it too was published by Heinemann Educational Books, a project the need for which was emphasized at the Conference, primarily to provide a bibliography of Commonwealth Literature accompanied by critical articles.

As a matter of courtesy we asked two other members of the Council to attend, Mrs. H. A. Morrish and Richard Simcox, and a

member of the Commonwealth Relations Office, J.E. King. Jack Hughes, who had worked in Delhi with that Office as a cultural attaché and had developed a deep interest in Indian and Pakistani writing in English, was to guide ACLALS, the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (which arose out of the conference) towards the new Commonwealth Foundation established in 1966, which, under the skilled direction of St. John Chadwick, himself an author on Commonwealth subjects, supported NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) in a stern yet generous fashion. Without the Foundation's help, ACLALS would not have been able to mount its successful series of triennial conferences, held successively in different Commonwealth countries.

It had not occurred to us to go outside the Commonwealth; it was, in this sense, a domestic conference — but then, in Dr. Watson's phrase, we were amateurs. I don't think the term "postcolonialism" had been invented then. He is certainly wrong in his assertion that in its earliest days the field of postcolonial studies "was forged in, and bears the marks of, the encounter and rivalry between postwar US globalization and the declining European territorial empires" (52). He argues that my opening address at the Conference "begins to sound like an attempt to carve out a non-US dominated intellectual space in a postwar world increasingly under American economic, military, and cultural influence" (55). He attacks as "unthinking" my remarks about the need for Commonwealth writers not to write specifically for "readers in Heckmondwike or Helmsby rather than those in Wagga Wagga or Enugn" nor "become incomprehensible in *any* of these places . . . [but] make a distinctive contribution to our common heritage." This, he argues, bypasses "the English publishing capital, New York (and even London, it seems)" (55). The common heritage or culture is carried and transmitted mainly by publishers. I was, in fact, arguing against provincialism, but the point has not been grasped.

It is possible that Dr. Watson has been unduly influenced by Alan McLeod's attitudes for he quotes McLeod's wrongheaded description of "the somewhat chauvinistic decision [mine by implication; the adjective seems ill-chosen] not to invite any

American to the 1964 Leeds conference, on the theory that they might 'over-run' the field" (55).

Dr. Watson goes on to state, erroneously, that "the Leeds conference, and the subsequent development of Commonwealth literature studies, were predicated [I confess I am never quite sure what this word means in academes; "chauvinistic," "anachronistic," and "paternalistic" labels are probably a kind of reflex action to anything one does not like] — just as in the responses to the Cardiff poetry conference — on the careful exclusion of potentially disruptive American influences" (55). The reference to the Cardiff conference is not very germane. It was very badly run, indeed chaotic, and many sensible people at it called it a shambles. It was not academic, and I don't think "scandalous" behaviour at it was confined to any one national group. It is really very superficial indeed, however, to be tempted to dismiss James McAuley's caustic comments on it "with a chuckle and move on" (53). But moving on to allude to "the scandalous presence of 'America'" is to prepare us for the author's case: "the central place of the US in the foundation of Commonwealth literary studies" (54). The author should prove — though he will not be able to — "the careful exclusion of potentially disruptive American influences" (55). (Why disruptive? Is this based on some knowledge of the behaviour of some individual American individuals at Cardiff?)

To answer this attack let me be personal again. I am not ashamed for saying, not in 1964 but in 1975, that I was "baffled by the American question: 'What is your field?'" To me the field suggests a narrow enclosed paddock when scholars are overly, narrowly specialized.

Dr. Watson describes me as "a Yeats scholar" (54). My field? But then I am equally at home in and have published a good deal on Restoration drama, Swift and Goldsmith, eighteenth-century English writers, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish writers, the history of Anglo-Irish and Irish literature, and various aspects of Commonwealth literature. He mentions my editing *ARIEL* but not my eight years' editing of *A Review of English Literature* from which *ARIEL* sprang. And, oh dear, being accused of amateurism and anti-Americanism nearly made me

forget that I have written articles on Whitman, edited a selection of his work for the Oxford University Press, and written the article on him in the US-owned *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

These interests, to my mind, often illuminate each other and I should have hated to have tied myself down to any one of them. If I am characterized as a founder of an “anti-professionalism theme” (57), then I must record my view that many scholars now tend to write criticism aimed at fellow academics. And in some cases this can lead to jargon, name dropping, in-fighting often of a medieval logic-chopping kind, or, as he quotes me, “too much tired professional thesis-style criticism” (57).

Finally let me confess I was greatly amused to be described as a “charismatic powerbroker” (54) — not how I ever saw myself, but bless him for the strange, perhaps well meant description. Dr. Watson and I obviously live in very different worlds. I am sorry he wasn't old enough to be at Leeds in 1964. He might have learned a lot about the Commonwealth's sense of family there, for it was a family affair to which we did not invite the far distant (or many times removed?) cousins. Too bad. Many of them have joined ACLALS since: it is a relatively professional body which arose out of our amateurism, and where I'm sure they will always be welcome. Personally I prefer collaborative to competitive scholarship.