

1980

Correspondence

Anna Rutherford
University of Aarhus, Denmark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rutherford, Anna, Correspondence, *Kunapipi*, 2(1), 1980.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss1/19>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Correspondence

Abstract

Correspondence

Correspondence

Objecting to some interpretations in my review of his book *Ethnic Radio* (*Kunapipi* I,1) Les Murray asks whether he has really written 'so loosely and equivocally' as to justify them. This, I think, is not quite the point. Les, as my review points out, relies heavily on a certain Delphic brevity, on the expunging of explanatory and connective tissue. He is not in my opinion more obscure than other major poets, but he is so in a different way. Most twentieth-century poets play more or less by the rules of Leavis's 'intentionalist fallacy' argument, like T. S. Eliot who was almost never known to endorse or reject a critic's interpretation. Les, by contrast, tends to have a clear notion of the 'right' interpretation of even his more Delphic lines; and to his credit he is usually willing to explain it.

But, like Experience, he keeps a hard school. The reader who fails to work out what's going on in a poem like 'The Euchre Game' or 'Dedication for the Vernacular Republic' is expected to blame his or her own defective sense of reality, or ignorance of the environment described. The problem is that if one does have a slightly different sense of reality, or comes from a different Australian background or half-generation, some of Les's references may be less clear than he intends.

For instance he blames me for want of human sympathy in failing to guess the correct interpretation of 'flat food round the midriff, long food up your sleeves, in his poem 'Employment for the Castes in Abeyance'. Presumably he hasn't checked the context of this line which he attributes to another poem. In fact it seems to me that it would be a lucky rather than an astute reader who could guess the intended meaning.

I also think that Les often flaunts controversial ideas, but is inclined like any experienced controversialist to shift ground slightly when attacked. For instance, my brief reference to his 'prematurely confident assertion' that

machine translation never happened:
language defeated it. We are a language species.

draws a long reply beginning: 'The assertion that machine translation hasn't yet been a success is justified by my researches into the matter.' But in Les's terse style the three flat statements in the lines quoted above sound like a great deal more than a mere *pro. temp.* report that machine translation *hasn't yet* been a success. I was interested in fact to find him confirming my suspicion that there was a theological as well as a linguistic element to his suggestion that machines can't translate human language. It still seems to me that this sort of implied negative prediction is as unwise as most others of its kind, especially at the start of the computer age.

There are also problems with local idiom. For instance I once asked Les if there was any special meaning to the phrase 'prime brush land' in his poem 'Laconics'. To the best of my recollection he replied that in his part of the country it had the established meaning of 'rainforest country'. Accordingly I accepted the poem as being about the clearing of

rainforest — an important point. Les in his reply rejects this interpretation, asserting that *brush land* 'refers to a soil type'. Simple though the misunderstanding may have been, it illustrates one of the dangers in turning to an author for the explanation of a poem.

There is understandably a certain apologetic tone about Les's long defence of his poem 'Cwdeitar' in which he set up the straw-man of a reformed spelling of English so clumsy as to justify his own prejudices against reform. I don't intend to point out the flaws (as any educated Dutchman, Portuguese, Spaniard, Greek etc. could do) in Les's various attempts to prove that it's impracticable to update spelling. What is more worrying, especially in a professed democrat, is his tendency to gloss over the social issues. For instance, the existence of two million adult illiterates in Britain in 1974 strikes him as normal:

In a population of fifty million, that's four percent, which is pretty much the standard proportion everywhere, in countries with phonetic spelling systems and with idiosyncratic ones. It represents the unfortunates whom teachers call ineducable, the sub-normal, the severely dyslexic, certain of the severely handicapped, etc.

This reads like the bumpf of a conservative educationalist. In fact two million *adult* illiterates in a total population of fifty million works out to very much more than 4% illiteracy. In any case it would be callous and implausible to write off 4% of the human race as incapable of learning to read. Most Italian or Spanish-speaking educationalists would query that even 1% of their populations were so. True, the English-speaking countries, despite universal schooling and relatively princely educational spending, do have appalling illiteracy (and sub-literacy) rates. As the British government's recent report on illiteracy *A Language For Life* points out, it is not merely a matter of common sense but is 'amply confirmed by statistics' that the irregular spelling of English is a major obstacle to literacy, because the beginner has no reliable way to associate the written with the spoken word. The whole issue of course is one which people who have passed through the intense childhood indoctrination of an English-style education have great difficulty in thinking clearly about. But the point made with some care in my review was not that the flawed pattern of ideas in 'Cwdeitar', one of Les's least satisfactory poems, was a fair sample of his achievement as a social philosopher but that it reveals certain important (and not always detrimental) tensions in his thought: between upbringing and erudition, common sense and common opinion, 'Boeotian' and egalitarian sympathies.

Les has caught me out, however, in a misreading of his poem 'A Sixties Future', which I took to be a satirical vision of a giant university that extends its apparatus of seminars, faculties, etc. to the cleaning and 'sub-technical' staff. In fact the vision is rather of an entire society so organized; and my comments are thereby rendered irrelevant.

Finally I should say that I can't quite accept Les's dismissal of 'radical' and 'conservative' as shoddy terms. They seem to me, like their close cousins 'left' and 'right' in the world of politics, to represent vague but real things — tendencies that can shape lives, states, and systems of thought as silently and surely as advancing glaciers. Which is not to say that the objective position is necessarily the one that seems middle-of-the-spectrum today, but merely that each of us has, and therefore needs to be aware of, his own temperamental bias.

MARK O'CONNOR

Journals

CHANDRABHAGA

This is a new Indian journal edited by one of India's major poets, Jayanta Mahapatra. In his editorial to the first issue Jayanta Mahapatra writes:

We consider English to be a major Indian language, like the fifteen major languages used in various areas of India.

So we shall try to publish Indian writing in English, in the main. We shall also use translations from the regional languages, in English. But the scope of *Chandrabhaga* shall not be limited to the geographical boundaries of this country: we will use whatever we feel is relevant to writing and writers around the world, because we believe in a healthy feedback between Indian and non-Indian writing.

In keeping with this policy the first two issues include among others things poems and short stories by Indian writers, articles on Wallace Stevens, J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Shiv K. Kumar's poetry, a conversation with Raja Rao and an article by Rabi S. Mishra on A. K. Ramanujan's poetry. This article led to a reply by R. Parthasarathy and Misha has in turn replied to Parthasarathy.

The journal is attractively produced and what is important (and sometimes rare in Indian publications in English) is carefully proof-read.

If the first two issues are any indication *Chandrabhaga* can look forward to a bright future which it deserves. It appears twice a year, cost is \$10 and all correspondence should be sent to the Editor, Tinkonia Bagicha, Cuttack 753 001, Orissa, India.

PACIFIC QUARTERLY MOANA

The October, 1979 issue (Vol. IV, No. 4) of this international review of arts and ideas has a special 52 page section on Australian writing. Of particular interest and I believe of value to scholars of Australian literature is Michael Wilding's review/article of Fred Lock and Alan Lawson, *Australian Literature: A Reference Guide* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1977). Wilding quite rightly takes Lock and Lawson to task because of the narrowness and conservatism of their work and at the same time provides an additional bibliography that will do much to atone for the omissions in the other bibliography. As the editors of *Pacific Quarterly Moana* suggest, Wilding's article is much more than a review. It raises important issues and it is to be hoped that these issues will be taken up and discussed in future issues of this journal. Ken Gelder's article 'Uncertainty and Subversion in the Australian Novel: Recent Fiction in a Framework' is very much a repeat of his article in *Waves*. For a further discussion of *Pacific Quarterly Moana* see the Review section of this issue of *Kunapipi*.

WAVES

The Summer 1979 issue (Vol. VII, No. 4) of this Canadian journal of creative writing is a special issue on Australian writing. It contains fiction and poetry by many of Australia's established and 'less' established writers and an article by Ken Gelder on 'Character and Environment in Some Recent Australian Fiction'.

LONDON MAGAZINE

It must be Australia's year for the double August-September issue of *The London Magazine* will be a special one on Australia.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

ACLALS

SUVA CONFERENCE, 1980

The Fifth Triennial ACLALS Conference was held on the campus of the University of the South Pacific in Suva 3-8 January, 1980. It was attended by approximately 150 writers and scholars from 25 countries. Satendra Nandan and the other organizers are to be congratulated on a very successful conference. There was a very full programme with over 70 papers to be read as well as three plenary sessions and two public readings. The papers are to be published by Dr Satendra Nandan.

The organizers did everything possible to make the visitors' stay on the island as enjoyable as possible. Numerous receptions were arranged in the evenings hosted by the Vice Chancellor, the Mayor of Suva and the Indian High Commission, and there was an excursion to the Fijian Cultural Centre.

Accommodation and meals were provided on campus for a ridiculously low fee. Admittedly the accommodation was spartan, but it was spotlessly clean. It was therefore amusing and somewhat depressing to find almost half the overseas delegates fleeing after the first night to hotel accommodation in Suva. It is unrealistic to come to a climate like this and not expect cockroaches. The people who left are the same people who write about the Third World, beat their breasts about inequality and the plight of the little man. The irony of their departure was made even sharper by the fact that the majority moved into the Grand Pacific Hotel, a mini-Raffles. There is an even nicer irony. The Grand Pacific has two wings, the old colonial wing and the modern wing. All the delegates moved into the colonial wing — it was cheaper!

ACLALS (EUROPEAN BRANCH)

The next European conference will take place in Frankfurt/Main, West Germany, from 23 to 27 March 1981. The theme of the conference is *History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature*.

Those wishing to participate in the conference kindly contact Professor Dr Dieter Riemenschneider, Institut für England- und Amerikastudien, Johann Wolfgang Goethe Universität, Kettenhofweg 130, 6 Frankfurt/Main, West Germany.

There will be a registration fee of DM30 to be paid on arrival in Frankfurt.

NEW ZEALAND ARTS FESTIVAL, AARHUS

There will be a New Zealand Arts Festival and Conference in Aarhus from 10 to 17 November 1980. It will be run along similar lines to the Australian Arts Festival held in Aarhus in 1978.

The theme of the conference is 'New Zealand through the eyes of her writers'.

Any persons wishing to attend and/or give a paper should contact Anna Rutherford, Department of English, University of Aarhus, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

LITERARY PRIZES

ACLALS (EUROPE) SHORT STORY COMPETITION

The European branch of ACLALS invite entries for its short story competition. Persons eligible are citizens of Commonwealth countries other than Britain (nationals of other countries living in Britain are eligible).

The prize money is 3,000 Danish kroner and there is an entry fee of 30 kroner. Three copies of each entry must be submitted and the organizers reserve the right to publish any entry in *Kunapipi*, the journal of the association.

Closing date for entries is 31 January and results will be announced in June, 1981.

Entries should be sent to The Chairperson, ACLALS (Europe), Department of English, University of Aarhus, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark.

COMMONWEALTH POETRY PRIZE 1980

The prize of £500 is awarded annually for a *first* published book of poetry in English by an author from a Commonwealth country other than Britain (nationals of other countries living in Britain are eligible).

Publishers are requested to submit titles published between 1 July 1979 and 30 June 1980. Seven copies of each title, for retention by the Judges, should be received not later than 30 June 1980. Manuscripts cannot be accepted.

A brief account of the author's life and career should accompany entries, and should include the place and date of birth and current address.

The award will be announced at the end of August 1980.

Send entries to: The Librarian (Poetry Prize), Commonwealth Institute, Kensington High Street, London W8 6NQ, Gt Britain.

THE JOURNAL OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

The above journal wishes to bring out a special issue on contemporary writing in English on India by people of non-Indian origin. This has not been paid any concerted critical attention since Independence (1947), and there is a quite inaccurate impression that Western creative literary interest in India is dying.

JIWE needs approximately £100 for the venture. Support from grant-making organizations is, we understand, unlikely for one special issue. The viability of the issue therefore depends on support from private individuals and JIWE will be most grateful for any support, however small, that you as an ACLALS member feel able to give.

The special issue will include creative writing by people of non-Indian origin, and critical writing on such work by people of all backgrounds. Suitable contributions are invited for consideration. Please enclose an sae with stamps or IRCs if a reply is desired. The deadline for submissions is 31 December 1980. All correspondence to the Guest Editor, Prahbu S. Guptara, Vine House, Whelford, near Fairford, Glos., UK.

Annual subscriptions to JIWE cost £2 by sea and£4 by air.

EACLALS NEWSHEET

All paid up members of EACLALS as of 31 March 1980 were sent an EACLALS NEWSHEET containing

1. Reports on
 - A. General meeting of ACLALS, Fiji, 8 January 1980
 - B. Executive meeting of ACLALS, Fiji, 6 January 1980
 - C. General meeting of EACLALS, Fiji, 8 January 1980
2. Call for nominations.
3. Articles of Association
4. Information about EACLALS conference, Frankfurt, 1981.

If any financial members did not receive this Newsheet *please* contact Anna Rutherford.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS FOR THE 1980-83 TRIENNIAL PERIOD

Only one nomination was received nominating Anna Rutherford as Chairperson, Hena Maes-Jelinek as Secretary and Alastair Niven as Treasurer. As there were no other nominations these three people were elected.

Donald Hannah
Returning Officer