

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

A Tribute to Syd Harrex

Sue Hosking

There are many of us, spread across Australia, from Perth to Norfolk Island, and across the world, from India, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, Jamaica, Canada, and the Americas – who are part of an extraordinary community that Syd created. I was lucky enough to be one of



Syd with Sue, Rick and Corrie Hosking

Syd's students – one of the first intake at Flinders, fifty years ago next year. As a university teacher, Syd was patient, encouraging and firm when necessary: 'for heaven's sake speak: you're as quiet as a little old lady waiting for a train with her knitting bag.' Now, half a century later, I find myself knitting in front of the tellie, but I'm no longer afraid to talk.

Syd was inspirational, especially when it came to poetry. His reverence for Yeats, Dylan Thomas and Robert Frost, particularly, opened my eyes to the power

of poetry. 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower;' 'Something there is that does not love a wall ...' When Syd read these poems, as a poet himself, we understood them.

Syd was more than a teacher to so many of us. His postgraduates, many of whom came from overseas, were nurtured by Syd in the Centre he established: the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English. That Centre was immensely important, opening up the field of what Syd chose to call New Literatures in English: that was a ground-breaking innovation. I worked for Syd as a research assistant for a few years and will never forget the visitors who came to Flinders, expecting a named building and finding a room, in which postgraduates worked under Syd's guidance to edit the *CRNLE Reviews Journal*, which he founded, as well as other publications. If eminent visitors were sometimes surprised by our basic amenities, they understood that the Centre was more than a room: it was a hub, connecting people, all of whom knew Syd and shared his determination to promote literatures in English that had previously been excluded from the canon.

I benefitted enormously from Syd's mentorship. I learnt how to conduct scholarly research with him. He insisted that anyone who participated in research leading to publication should share authorship with him. Because of this generosity, many of us who worked with Syd as editors, postgraduates or research assistants, built up publication profiles that enabled us to apply successfully for jobs in other universities. I'll never forget the excitement of following Syd's hunch that the popular *Letters of an Indian Judge to an English Gentlewoman* was a hoax. Nor will I ever forget his encouragement to accompany him to a conference in Mysore, staying with the late Professor C.D. Narasimhaiah, taking a hair-raising taxi ride with Syd, after the conference, from Mysore to Mumbai. I felt safe with Syd in India, even when the taxi driver turned his lights off at night, to save petrol, he said. Writers and university people recognised

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and respected Syd there. He knew where to go – what to do – how to make friends and influence people. He was loved and admired and we bobbed along in his wake.

Syd was to me, as he was to his postgraduates, a teacher and mentor. But he was also a friend. He remained interested in all of us, wrote poems for significant events, such as the births of our children, wined and dined us far beyond our deserts, shared our triumphs and cried with us when life was too sad. His comfort, his presence and insights, are impossible to forget. I am one of many who will be always grateful for his legacy and I hope that those closest to him, his family, will take some comfort in this.