

OBITUARIES

BRUCE BENNETT

1941-2012

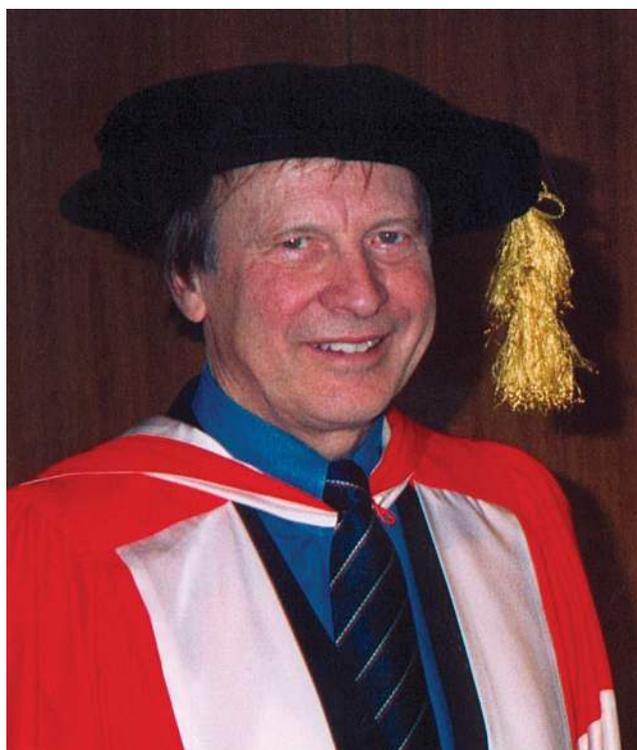


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WHEN Bruce Bennett died on 14 April 2012 an extraordinarily productive career in Australian literary studies came to an end. Born on 23 March 1941, Bennett grew up in Perth, Western Australia. A scholarship got him into Hale School, where he shone both at his studies and, in the eyes of younger boys, as novelist Robert Drewe remembers, as leader of the school's air force cadets, deftly wielding a well-polished regimental sword on parade. A second anecdote captures a more enduring aspect of his personality. It is one of his own, first revealed in his book on spy literature, *The Spying Game*, published just a month after his early death at the age of seventy-one. It appears that he was interviewed for the Australian foreign service, and thus potentially a spy, immediately before

accepting, instead, a position as a lecturer at the University of Western Australia (UWA) in 1968. Already, it seems, someone in authority had guessed that he might be an intelligent young man who knew how to keep his own counsel, who could be trusted, and who, as a good literary critic, could read human situations, whether in literature or in life, for intention, tone, colour and contexts.

This interview occurred immediately after Bennett's return from Oxford, where a Rhodes Scholarship had taken him during 1964-7 for a second BA—an educational route chosen by many bright Australians at the time—at Pembroke College. There he met and in 1967 married a local schoolteacher, Patricia Staples, who bravely returned with him to the large country town that Perth must have seemed at the time, in the underpopulated western third of a very large continent. Their twin children Michael and Catherine were born in 1970.

At first Bruce Bennett's energies at UWA were divided between the disciplinary cluster of Education and English. He had taken a Diploma of Education from Claremont Teachers College after his first BA; and in 1974 he gained a MA in Education from the University of London. He became actively involved in curriculum setting for the secondary school system in WA and would be elected a fellow of the Australian College of Education in 1990. As a young Australian in Oxford struggling to come to terms with what was perceived, there, as a colonial identity, he had gradually realised it was necessary to affirm through one's reading and commitment that one's identity is indelibly coloured by where one lives. This would gradually have impact on his thinking about literary curricula after his return home. English studies would have to change. The role of place, then of region and ultimately of nation, would be central. For him, this inevitably implied, first, Western Australian and then Australian literature, and ultimately the literature in English of Australia's near neighbours, especially Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines—a rare interest in Australian English departments of the 1970s and 1980s.

His first article 'Australian Literature and the Universities' (in *Melbourne Studies in Education* in 1976) was prescient, and an essay on poetry from Malaysia and Singapore appeared as early as 1978. Essays mainly from the 1980s, revised for his book *Australian Compass* (1991), show the imprint of region and nation. The one on Les Murray's and Peter Porter's responses to European culture is memorable, and its ideas were further developed in his biography of Porter, *Spirit in Exile* (1991). In that book, which won the WA Premier's Award, Porter's quintessentialising of European culture as an eternal present is portrayed as the intellectual condition of an Australian in exile. This portrayal was in some ways a generational disagreement about Australian identity while also being a generous acknowledgement of Porter's high poetic skill.

By 1973 Bruce Bennett and Veronica Brady had convinced their colleagues to allow a full-year subject in Australian literature, the first such offering at UWA. In 1975 he was appointed co-editor with Peter Cowan of *Westerly*, and in 1982 Bennett became the foundation director of the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature. By 1985 he had risen to Associate Professor in English and was appointed Commissioner in that year for the Federal Government report, *Windows onto Worlds: Studying Australia at Tertiary Level*. Co-written with Kay Daniels and Humphrey McQueen, it appeared in 1987 in the lead-up to the Australian Bicentenary celebrations.

There was a surge of interest in things Australian in that decade, but its history needs to be appreciated. Bruce Bennett was a half-generation younger than the pioneers in the field of Australian literary studies such as Harry Heseltine, Bruce's predecessor and later Rector of University of New South Wales at ADFA, Gerry Wilkes, Laurie Hergenhan and John Barnes, amongst others. They had to address the slow-burning cultural battle of the 1950s that extended through the 1960s when Bennett was doing his undergraduate studies in Australia. On one side of the fence were the cultural nationalists, many of whom were journalists, who emphasised that the importance of Australian literature stemmed from the fact that it was Australian. On the other side was the new professoriate whose members appealed to broader international standards and who tended to accept that literature courses ought to be restricted to the great works of the English (and later, American) tradition, works which dealt with the larger themes of the human condition as it was then understood. If by extreme good fortune some few Australian works measured up to those standards then they might be admitted.

Bruce Bennett sought a medial position in this debate, valuing the aesthetic qualities of important literature, preserving tradition but energetically insisting on the need to cherish and teach the literature that had sprung out of

or reflected on Australian conditions. In judging worthwhile literature in terms of its capacity to stimulate readers to discoveries about themselves and their place in the world, Bennett gave a productive inflection to what had become, by the 1970s, a stymied debate. Hence the emphasis in his early writing on the theme of literature, region and place, a theme that would be reclaimed by others in environmental criticism, somewhat to his surprise, late in his career.

In 1993 Bruce Bennett took up the chair in English at the University of New South Wales at ADFA in Canberra. He delivered an encouragingly inclusive inaugural address (published as *Professing English Today*), which showed that the postwar divisiveness in English departments between literary criticism on the one hand and scholarship (bibliography, scholarly editing, literary history, biography) on the other had no attraction for him. He had arrived in the right place. Though entirely without pompousness or self-importance, he was nevertheless a man on a mission. He convinced his new colleagues to further Australianise their syllabus, and he took up the cudgels within ADFA to maintain funding and to extend the coverage of the online AUSTLIT bibliographic database. It had been initiated by Harry Heseltine in 1985 and launched in the ADFA Library in 1988 by Gough Whitlam. After 2001, when the database became a cooperative one, shared and contributed to, by a number of universities, Bennett remained its enthusiastic advocate and for some years co-chaired its Board with John Hay. Though *in extremis* only a fortnight before his death from lung cancer when I visited him at home, he nevertheless wanted to know how things were going with it. I was able to reassure him, and in fact 2013 will see its silver anniversary with the number of entries approaching one million.

A tireless conscience for the good of the field characterised Bruce Bennett's career, whether organising from 1982 with Edwin Thumboo of Singapore the biennial series of invitational symposia on Asia-Pacific literatures, serving as president of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature for 1983-5, editing or co-editing nearly a score of conference proceedings volumes and other collections, serving on committees of review of other universities' English programmes and, notably, on the Australia-India Council from 2002.

Scholars responded well to Bruce. His winning smile with a characteristically wry edge helped put people at their ease. He was a naturally gregarious and very modest man. Yet, beneath the modesty, he was quietly passionate about what he believed in. When the interests of colleagues or others with whom he was dealing overlapped with his, he would often be successful in marshalling their energies to work towards a shared goal or ideal. They sensed his enthusiasm for the common cause and many trusted to it.

He had great patience in pursuing those causes. If they were to materialise in tangible results, then recruiting institutional or government support of one kind or another—whether through subtly shifting the teaching of his own department or by affecting government policy—would be necessary. Bruce instinctively distrusted knee-jerk reactions. He would read the local or the wider scene almost as if it were a play on the stage, a play of conflicting agendas whose as-yet-unknown outcome could go one way or another. He was a good reader because he had the capacity, not always but usually, to put himself outside the conflict. This capacity became more habitual and assured as he grew older.

In intellectual or institutional life one encounters opposition from time to time. I noticed that when Bruce encountered it himself, he went out of his way to try to look at the situation from the other person's point of view, to try to articulate the grounds of it so that he could understand it before he acted. In private conversation I found that he was most reluctant to criticise others. He kept his head. It was a caution born of a shrewd instinct, I think, that generosity, or if generosity was impossible then at least neutrality, gave the other person room to move and the chance to reassess things. Perhaps something better would come of not crystallising the disagreement rather than trying to dictate the outcome. Dictating outcomes by playing the role of the old-fashioned god professor was something Bruce hated the very idea of.

This instinct lent Bruce a balance in his assessments and judgements of how things were going institutionally or culturally or nationally, and of what could, in the prevailing circumstances, be done. The desirable agenda might at least be inched along in the right direction. So it was that people sensed he was a safe pair of hands and thus often turned to him for high-level committee work, such as those noted above. There were many other such

roles in his career. So it is not surprising that Bruce's blend of willingness and capacity to contribute effectively as a champion of literature, and of Australian literature especially, was recognised in 1993 with the award of an Order of Australia. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1995, received the Centenary Medal in 2003, and was, upon his retirement, appointed Group of Eight Professor of Australian Studies for 2005-06 at Georgetown University in Washington. On the basis of his published work, the University of New South Wales awarded him the Doctor of Letters in 2004 and appointed him Emeritus Professor in 2006.

Bruce spoke at countless international conferences. His speaking and his writing were typically light in touch, humane in spirit and readily accessible. Not for him were the abstractions of high Theory nor the hammer blows of strenuous literary criticism. The encyclopaedic coverage in his book *Australian Short Fiction: A History* (2002) was a perfect vehicle for his learning and balance, as was *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, which he co-edited with Jennifer Strauss in 1998. *Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood*, a collection of some of his essays from earlier years, followed in 2006.

After his retirement in 2005, Bruce went on contributing as an active and productive researcher for another half-dozen years. He saw proofs of *The Spying Game* shortly before he died; his final book with Ann Pender, a history of Australian expatriate writing in Britain, is in production. Truly Bruce died in the way that Mary Gilmore described her writer-mother's own death, 'with the ink still wet on the page'. Bruce Bennett was a scholar until the very end.

- PAUL EGGERT