

## APPENDIX: FILLM – History and Objectives

### The Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS)

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ACLALS is the most important body for 'Commonwealth Writing'. There has always been a robust debate on what exactly is 'Commonwealth Literature': the debate has often shifted creatively and critically to New Writing in English, World Literatures Written in English, and Postcolonial Theory, 'post-colonial' with or without a hyphen. Thereby hang several tales of deepening complexity, subtlety and controversy.

'Commonwealth Writing' has now acquired a worldwide relevance, significance and resonance. For some, it is the most exciting, dynamic and vital creative activity that has emerged out of the rubble of the great cultural imperium: the British Empire. Indeed writing from the Commonwealth has shaped radically the teaching of Literature beyond the British Isles. At one time Commonwealth Literature was defined by exclusion: it excluded literatures written in English in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States. Today it is more inclusive: literatures in English from the former British colonies remain the predominant focus; post-colonial writing now interrogates literatures in English from any part of the world; it includes translations and texts not originally written in English and lacking any direct connection with England. Franz Fanon is a critical case in point.

This exciting adventure began with a small step at the University of Leeds with A. N. Jeffares and his extraordinary vision. *A Shaping of Connections*, edited by Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, published in 1989, gives a fairly comprehensive picture of the colourful, fragmented mosaic that is Commonwealth Literature. The essays significantly are in honour of Derry Jeffares, who the editors note 'was certainly among the very first critics who had enough vision to perceive the significance of national literatures in English as a discipline distinct from English literature . . . The establishment of Commonwealth Literature was a great imaginative leap'. The editors comment:

. . . the papers on critical theory indicate the extent to which Commonwealth Studies have developed since the Leeds conference in 1964. What we have seen, particularly over the last few years, is an increase in confidence of scholars working in this area, which has led to a breaking up or modifying of the established canon of English literary studies thus allow-

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ing a larger space for the national literatures. What has developed is a post-colonial method of literary theory which challenges the usefulness of European theories in dealing with the literatures of the post-colonial world and attempts to suggest alternative readings of not only the post-colonial texts, but also those of the English and American canon.

But, as usual, the critics and scholars came after the poets and events. As I write, the great Indian writer R.K. Narayan died yesterday at the age of 94; and Anna Rutherford passed away a month previously.

The vision, energy, the healing imagination, the stamina and persistence of writers, scholars, critics, publishers, poets, politicians, teachers, students, journalists and readers has opened many worlds to the literary inheritance of our discursive universe, both of discourse and silence. Some of us who had grown up on the belief that 'a' was for an apple and 'z' was for a Zulu began to see the power of language, the structures in words, of reality behind words, beyond words. English, the imperial tongue, in many cases became the weapon of resistance and freedom, of acts of subversion and expressions of inner vision. As the poet John Agard wrote in his 'Listen Mr Oxford Don':

I only armed with mih human breath  
but human breath  
is a dangerous weapon.  
So mek dem send one big word after me  
I ent serving suffix in self-defence  
I bashing future with present tense  
and if necessary  
I making de Queen's English accessory to my offence.

The first conference was held at the University of Leeds in 1964. Its proceedings were published as *Commonwealth Literature*, edited by John Press of the British Council. Almost 40 years later it remains a classic of issues that trouble and inspire us at the new millennial dawn. The areas of critical theory have developed and deepened many shibboleths of colonial perceptions, challenged and renegotiated areas within national literature, examined and questioned issues of language, art, culture, identity, the politics of indigenouness and migrancy; the processes of writing, the poetics of intellectual hegemony have been explored and exposed in ways that make the past 50 years perhaps the most important half-century in human history. I would like to believe that *Commonwealth Literature* has made its small but vital contribution. As A.N. Jeffares put it in 1964 'we pay homage to those who create for us this way into an imaginative understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live'. Besides 11 international conferences in the latter part of the 20th century 9 currently active regional associations have held numerous events of their own, and all have together produced a substantial list of conference proceedings besides several journals, *Ariel*, *CARIB*, *CHIMO*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Kunapipi*, *SPAN*, and *World Literature Written in English* (WLWE).

In July 2001 the XIIth triennial conference of ACLALS was held in Canberra, Australia. The date and the place are important. Australia celebrates its 100th anniversary of Federation from a penal colony in 1788 to some sense of nationhood in 1901. But that national agenda had its grave limitations: the original inhabitants were not only dispossessed but not recognized as citizens until decades later. The vision of the nation was thus seriously flawed at its very heart.

This is why the theme of the 2001 conference is: 'Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth'. Each of the keywords had its own significance and salience: resistance to colonialism, colour, caste, creed through ceremonies of innocence, acts of violence, cults of violations and words. Resistance also to the western notions; a host of structures and theories

that defined people and places of which Edward Said has written with eloquence, disturbing clarity and dangerous honesty. So resistance works at many levels; decolonialization of the imagination has been the most intractable post-colonial condition, but the writers have made it integral to the shared human condition. The periphery is the centre; rather the centre is defined by its circumference; suddenly the most protean ideas were found, often scribbled in the margins. The process of reconciliation had begun, albeit a bit late for some.

'Reconciliation and Resistance', of course, have resonance in much of our troubled world. M.K. Gandhi had made his first gesture of resistance and reconciliation on 7 June 1893 in the obscure railway station at Pietermaritzburg in South Africa; it is one of the great stories of the Commonwealth. But there are many hills yet to climb, as Nelson Mandela put it so memorably in his book *Long Walk to Freedom*.

But 'Reconciliation' is also among the multiple layers of consciousness in which the healing imagination and 'the healing touch', Pandit Nehru's phrase, play important and creative roles. It is not only reconciliation with people; it is reconciling with one's history, one's historical darkness, putting the pieces of the broken vase together; it is reconciliation with place, people, the voices of the dead, sharing the sorrows of the living. To be able to reconcile ideas is equally important; those of us who write and study literary texts are very conscious of reconciling reading, texts and theory: these are acts of the mind that appear discrete but are really parts of the whole, wholeness of mind, in fact. The textural multiplicity of a piece is only reflecting the multiple realities of our existence: to reconcile our multiple identities in one's self: memory to redeem our past, imagination to transfigure our future, and vision to live in the present.

Nevertheless, the urgent issues of 'Commonwealth Literature' discussed at the 1964 Leeds conference remain with us today: Literature and Environment: Inheritance and Adaptation; Language and Culture; English Literature in Multilingual Societies; Communication and Responsibility, among others. Issues of education and literacy that Chinua Achebe highlighted; Identity and Nationality by B. Rajan and practical concerns relating to writing, books, marketing, the role of universities, functions of literary criticism, and the role of writers; and our contemporary concerns with women's issues, ethics, poverty, arms and wars: and bringing the peripheral to the centre. Commonwealth Writing has, in its unique and enduring way, contributed towards raising our consciousness in these fields of thought and action with theoretical underpinnings.

'Writing' itself has undergone marvellous transformations from rock carvings to digital communication. So the interpretation of human experience is a variegated and meaningful one. And 'Commonwealth' now is a dynamic term: it has thankfully lost its Britishness; there's a Commonwealth of Australia here; but more importantly it's the Commonwealth of Creations that one is talking about. The voices of peoples, almost two billion, whose fate is bound up with the other four billion; but the Commonwealth is a place in its writing of hope and healing; of rewriting history and representing present possibility. It is this that gives ACLALS its inner energy, purpose, fellowship and activity. As G.D. Killam commented on the 25th anniversary of Commonwealth Literature:

... the growth of Commonwealth Literature Studies which conveys nothing of the excitement and good fellowship that this growth, through the sharing of enthusiasms and opinions, the annual, biennial and triennial conferences which ACLALS and various regional associations have sponsored, has occasioned.

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