Tributes to Professor Bruce Bennett
From Members of the Transnational Literature Boards

From Rick Hosking, Flinders University

It will sadden many teachers and scholars around the world to hear about the death of Professor Bruce Bennett, who taught for many years at the University of Western Australia and then at the University of New South Wales in the Australian Defence Forces Academy in Canberra. Former Rhodes Scholar, teacher and researcher in Australian and postcolonial literatures, Bruce was a major figure in the Australian university scene: for many years he was a senior and influential member of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. He also played a major role in developing Australian Studies in India, with years of service on the Australia-India Council and on IASA, the Indian Association for the Study of Australia.

I remember Bruce in particular as a good friend of Flinders University: he attended many of our conferences, he encouraged us to undertake research in regional literary cultures, he was a passionate supporter of non-Melbourne Australian-Rules football teams. He was a kind man, good-humoured and genuinely collegial. We will all miss him.

From Dr R.K. Dhawan, University of Delhi

The demise of Professor Bruce Bennett last week has saddened us all. Professor Bennett taught at the University of Western Australia from 1968 to 1992, and the University of NSW, Canberra from 1993 until his retirement. He wrote and edited numerous books on Australian Literature, culture and society. He specialised in Australian Diasporic Writing. He was Chair of Austlit Board from its beginnings to 2004.

He was a great friend of India and visited several Indian universities. His death is a personal loss to me. I was introduced to Australian literary scenario by Prof Bennett. In 1991, he invited me and Vikram Seth to an international conference at UWA. I stayed at his residence for one night before the conference event. I shall always cherish the moments I spent with him.

India has lost a friend. Our heartfelt sympathies to his wife and family.

From Kirpal Singh, Singapore Management University

The Connector & Bridge-Builder: The late Bruce Bennett

I first met Bruce Bennett when he was invited by my (then) English Department at the University of Singapore as a Lever-Hulme Fellow. We got on from the very first. His wife Trish and he himself were amicable, amiable and quite a delight at almost all occasions – whether a serious Lecture he was
giving as obligation of his Fellowship or a strictly private dinner where the gathering was mostly friends.

As the years wore on, Bruce and I became quite close. He even stayed at my home en route to other destinations (yes – there was a time when Kirpal’s home was known to many Aussies as the ‘half-way house’) at least a couple of times. When Bruce was so inclined, he would be what the gamblers call ‘on a roll’. It was wonderful to have him around – for sheer diplomacy and for an extensive network, Bruce was hard to beat, especially when it came to academics/scholars working in Australian Literature.

He was also very good at ideas for conferences: several conferences which today are quite well-known brewed over chats and discussions with BB around. He had the knack for coming up with very catchy titles for such events and he was generous in sharing these with all around him.

Then we found ourselves growing old. Bruce moved to Canberra and I moved away from the old University (by now called NUS) to Nanyang and then to SMU, where I now am. Though I did try and invite him to SMU he was already unwell and so we never had the privilege of having him here. I did, though, succeed, in getting him to Nanyang-though, by then, he was not able to linger, as time, he felt, was not on his side.

Bruce accomplished more than most in the field of Australian and New Literatures. Though we often had disagreements, I never doubted his ability to deliver once agreement was reached on any project, conference, seminar, book etc.

And as I write these words, I recall what he said to me when we last met in Malaysia: ‘Kirpal, sometimes life does not work to our advantage but we must push on.’ And he pushed on, despite the pain and the suffering. He tried his best not to inflict us with his private burden but always had that winsome smile that anyone who has known him will attest to.

As we accept our loss, let us remember those words: sometimes life does not work to our advantage but we must push on. Yes, Bruce, we must, old friend.