

'Involved in Mankind':¹ Remembering Syd Harrex (1935-2015)

Melinda Graefe

I first met Syd Harrex in 1994. I had just completed honours at Flinders University and was attending an English department book launch held at the State Library of South Australia. I



Melinda Graefe and Molly Murn at Syd's table

recall Syd was in charge of serving wine.

Of course Syd's face was familiar, but we had never spoken together as I had never studied with him. I will sheepishly admit to not having studied Caribbean or Indian literature at either undergraduate or honours level. No worries. My ignorance of these literatures was about to be redressed, and my horizons broadened. Anyone who has met Syd will know that to encounter him is to encounter the variegated worlds that postcolonial literatures evoke. The two go

hand-in-hand in a necessary and vital way. Later, I again encountered Syd, as one inevitably and easily runs into friendly, sociable, intellectually engaged and generous people. They are always there to find, always ready to offer friendship and share ideas. Humphrey Tranter, Syd's colleague at Flinders, had invited me and another postgraduate student to join them for lunch at the University staff club. In this way I happily fell into an enduring friendship with Syd, which was also a kind of informal apprenticeship in poetry editing (and in deciphering hand writing). I knew and worked with Syd the poet, but I also had the unique opportunity to learn much about the vibrant literatures that have often been consigned to the peripheries of the university curriculum. Syd made the study and researching of them central. Many have gained immeasurably from Syd's inexhaustible knowledge of the new literatures in English. Recently, Rick Hosking wrote:

[Syd] created a vital and far-reaching research centre and network of teachers and scholars ... He connected many of us to a wider world.²

The tributes that are collected here, in the journal that Syd founded as an essential medium for exploring and engaging with the new literatures in English, all testify to his far-reaching vision and commitment to all areas of academia.

Many readers of the following tributes will note a recurrent reference to 'Syd's Table.' The table has been variously remembered as Table Ten, Table Four, and Table One, begging the question 'How many tables did Syd actually need for his gatherings?' Only one at a time, but they have always been full, with extra seating needed to include as many people as possible. With the closing of the staff club, Syd and company chose to gather at other university cafes, at

¹ John Donne, 'Meditation 17,' *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012) 1421.

² Ron Blaber (ed), 'Whaddya Know?': *Writings for Syd Harrex* (Mile End: Wakefield Press, 2015) n.p.

times resorting to perching our lunches on tiny round bar tables, bottoms precariously balanced on bar stools, while the cafes were closed for summer holidays. But Syd and company would always meet. The table numbers changed as the nomad-scholars of Syd's acquaintance would seek each other's company in their own moveable feast. Conversation was vital to Syd, and so were the collaborations which emerged from these gatherings. It is through meeting regularly with Syd that I have had the opportunity to meet his many friends and visiting guests – always interesting, always generous – and also to work with many of them, including Gillian Dooley, Michael Deves of Lythrum Press (who published Syd's poems) and Molly Murn, whose sensitivity to Syd's poetry is breathtakingly apparent in her tribute-poem. Many of us have fond recollections of meeting the internationally renowned guests who sat at the table, and for students it was a great opportunity to meet these academics informally and engage in the art of conversation.

These gatherings had an especial meaning for Syd; the tablecloth was almost as important as the table on which it was laid. In neat rounded letters, Syd's pen made its poetic marks on the



Rick Hosking, Melinda Graefe and Syd at the launch of *No Worries, No Illusions, No Mercy* (1999)

white paper tablecloths of the university cafes, napery manuscripts that have formed the basis of several excellent volumes of poems. It was initially my role to proofread, make a few suggestions about choice of word, the order in which poems might appear. Shortly after his retirement, Syd had composed so many poems that he required a second proofreader to help with getting them to publication, and poet Molly joined us at the table. Recently, Syd's handwriting had become almost indecipherable, due to the onset of macular degeneration, but that did not prevent Syd from composing. I remain in

awe of Syd's capacity to compose at this time despite many health-related setbacks, and it was a pleasure for both Molly and me to be there to catch the fragments of verse as they fell to the page or emerged, spoken, unrevised, some perfect nevertheless. The tablecloths that are now held in Special Collections at the Flinders Central Library are watermarked with the inevitable food and wine stains, ensuring further remembrances of Syd's creative conviviality.

The tributes collected here form part of a much larger international response to the lifework of Syd Harrex. Notably, Ron Blaber has edited a beautifully-produced collection of writings, *'Whaddya Know?'*, the title echoing one of Syd's famous Humanities hallway greetings (published by Wakefield Press, 2015). And Mohammad A. Quayum, *Asiatic's* Editor-in-Chief, has published a collection of tributes that can be found here:

<http://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/AJELL/issue/view/30>. *Transnational Literature* continues to celebrate Syd's unique achievements with a range of tributes in prose and poetry, from friends, colleagues and former students. We hear from distinguished professors Edward Baugh and Gerhard Stilz, who enjoyed tours of the southern regions of South Australia with Syd and his wife Jane; we hear from former students Sue and Rick Hosking, who flourished under Syd's guidance to become exceptionally fine scholars who have made important and unique contributions to the field of Australian literature (and there are many more of Rick's

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Syd Harrex tribute: 'Involved in Mankind': Remembering Syd Harrex (1935-2015). Melinda Graefe. *Transnational Literature* Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015. <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

anecdotes of Syd to be found in ‘*Whaddya Know?*’); we hear from fellow poets, some of whom were also from a more recent generation that studied with Syd and colleagues at Flinders University – Peter Endersbee, Kate Deller-Evans, Ioana Petrescu, Steve Brock, Molly Murn and Adrian Caesar provide exquisite mirrors that reflect their memories of Syd, of his guiding influence, his conviviality, and his passionate vision of and for the world. The poems also engage with Syd’s love of poetry in general; Kate’s ‘The Tempest Suite’ developed out of an initial project, ‘Postcolonial representations of Shakespeare’, commenced under Syd’s supervision.



Syd with Jo Wing at Penneshaw © Peter Endersbee

In her eulogy, Jane remembered Syd as a gentleman. A gentle man. With gentle guidance, Syd has made a significant contribution to changing the academic landscape for the better. He has shown us, with great clarity of awareness, the ways in which we as academics and artists should nurture, foster, understand and respect the literature of all cultures. He ran the Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English with few material resources; the centre itself was manifest in its web of strong relationships, affectionately nurtured with

academics and artists from around the world. All of us who travel in Syd’s footsteps have learnt that one must tread softly:

Had I the heavens’ embroidered cloths,
 Enwrought with golden and silver light,
 The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
 Of night and light and the half-light,
 I would spread the cloths under your feet:
 But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
 I have spread my dreams under your feet;
 Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.³

Thank you Syd, for presenting to the world a rich embroidery of possibilities for how we might go about our work in more meaningful ways as academics.

I would like to thank Peter Endersbee for sharing the photographs that he took on a recent trip with Syd to Kangaroo Island. Like many of Syd’s former students, Peter shared a close and enduring friendship with Syd, based on a shared love of poetry, music, and footy, and more especially the musical poetry of the divine bard, Dylan Thomas, a recording of whose poems

³ W.B. Yeats, ‘He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,’ *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 75.

Peter listened to with his mentor at Syd's home. Kate Deller-Evans' 'The Tempest Suite' appeared in *Divan*, 5 (2004), and more recently as part of Kate's chapbook *Strut & Fret* (Ginninderra Press, 2014).