The conference proceedings publication is an odd beast. You hold a major event that needs mass attendance to cover costs, and nearly everyone attending has to present a paper to get travel funding, so the theme is broad enough to admit anyone’s work. The point of the conference is to get to review current activity across one’s field, but the more representative the conference, the fewer papers you can attend. And although the ideal is to showcase cutting-edge research, the time available for each paper allows mostly for a few generalisations and quick sketches of material the audience may well not have read. One wonders whether this becomes a pre-internet version of academic twittering. One wonders how long it will be before university administrators or travel-weary academics decide it is more cost effective to teleconference or put papers up on a website. Of course this is already occurring, and in fact, the two hefty print volumes reviewed here are having it both ways, with e-book versions as well.

Conferences present a special challenge to editors of proceedings in whatever medium they appear. What is their function nowadays? Is it just to satisfy the machinery of commodified research that grants points for publication from which university funding flows? Who reads them: just the contributors looking for a souvenir or that paper they weren’t able to get to? just a few of the new generation postgrads who have to check exhaustively who said what about their pet topic? Should they attempt to represent the spread of the original event, or would it be better to concentrate on the papers most germane to the theme, the ones most challenging to the discipline, the ones bringing new writing to our attention?

Stella Borg Barthet, not daunted by having convened the conference, has undertaken a huge task in collecting what must be a good proportion (almost 60) of the papers from the conference of the European Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies, held in Malta in 2005. The Mediterranean island location supplies the maritime metaphors that title the two volumes, and she has attempted to make the collection user-friendly and conceptually ordered by grouping the contents into themes. Volume 1 comprises ‘Towards a Postcolonial Commonwealth’, ‘Borders and Crossings’, ‘Perception, Space and Time’, Religion and the Sacred’, History and Narrative’ and ‘Language and Translation’; Volume 2 has ‘Projecting Postcolonialism’, ‘War and Remembrance’, ‘Writing Women’, ‘Islands and the Sea’, and ‘Shared Spaces’. It’s not hard to see how the spatial metaphors might have been conflated into a more selective unit, and certainly the two general ‘postcolonial’ sections lacked consistency and in most cases said little that readers of Commonwealth Literatures will not have already heard. An exception is Brian Crow’s ‘Exclusion and the Intellectuals’ which usefully critiques the implications of the global commodification of higher education. Peter Stummer also productively reflects on the Hyderabad ACLALS conference, making pertinent points about the place of Dalit writing in the Commonwealth/Postcolonial field of study.
One of the good reasons for holding to a representative spread is the number of papers that reintroduce Maltese writing to postcolonial literary studies. Daniel Massa, who edited one of the very early ACLALS conference proceedings, provides an opening address as Chair of the 2005 Commonwealth Writers Prize, and both volumes contain papers on Maltese poetry, Francis Ebejer’s fiction, an interesting history of Maltese language policy and a sociolinguistics look at conversation styles in Maltese marriages. One can envisage a tightly focused collection of such papers that would make a very cohesive volume, but would be limited in its market. The broader ambit allows these and other papers on less well-known writers (particularly those of Moroccan, Egyptian and Sudanese origin) to reach new readers. The Anglophone focus of ACLALS is productively stretched in the collections, even if the Commonwealth frame is broken in the process (not only Arabic-language writing, but fiction from Angola and Mozambique is discussed), but the sub-disciplinary coherence remains, with studies of many of the usual writers (Chinua Achebe, Thea Astley, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Austin Clarke, Zadie Smith, Margaret Atwood, Caryl Phillips, Nadine Gordimer, Tayeb Salih, and Amitav Ghosh).

There’s considerable pressure on editors of conference proceedings. They have to send out the thank-yous, finalise the payments, and get back to the demands of classroom and faculty, all while culling and reading and negotiating with tender egos if there’s a rejection or a relocated comma. Then there is the pleading with people who take good papers off to a journal, and we know all the stories of books that are still ‘in production’ years after the original event, when all the shine has gone from whatever was new at the time. I’m not surprised that it took Borg Barthet three to four years to get these sizeable volumes out, and it is a continuing source of outrage that editing receives no recognition in many universities as serious research work.

That said, there are moments when more time could have been spent on copyediting. In A Sea for Encounters, Monica Bungaro, for example, makes a clear case about the challenges of teaching African literature in the UK, but her paper covers the same ground at least three times. Peter Stummer is allowed to write that ‘Limbale had originally been published in Marathi in 1984 and previously in Hindi in 1991’ (14); place becomes ‘peace’ (31). In the other volume, Jay Hubble has striven to ‘outline the American canon’ (21) and a quote sets up a list of writers that ‘reads like an Australian Hall of Literary roll call’ (29) — presumably, a Hall of Literary Fame roll call. Subject-verb agreements are often out of whack for lack of an s. It is perhaps churlish to point out such things, but the standing of a conference proceedings publication in particular relies in large part on the process after the original presentation, of getting promising papers to develop their arguments in the most cogent and succinct way, and having everything rigorously proofed. One of the purposes of the conference proceedings publication is also so those unable to attend can check how their field is being reshaped, where the new angles on their own teaching and research topics are, and so on. A reliable index is a key means of facilitating this. Unfortunately random checks through both volumes found numbers out by anything from 2 to 22 pages (and one entry is listed as page 417 despite neither volume having that many pages). Perhaps there was an earlier draft from which some chapters were pulled? This may not have been the editor’s doing, but both she and the
publisher should have done some last-minute checking.

Features of the two volumes are the push to universalist values in some of the more general papers (perhaps consistent with the idealism of the Commonwealth as a construct, but in continued conflict with the politicised and particularised postcolonial), a careful engagement with Islam in Jamie Scott’s reading of Tayeb Salih, a demonstration by Robert Cribb of how ecological protection was deployed by Dutch colonialism to justify its transition to directly controlled plantation economy in Indonesia, and an analysis by Natasha Distiller of the ambiguous outcomes of Maria Jeffreys’ defence of ‘coloureds’ in 1950-60s South Africa. Marie Herbillon joins those focussing on chronotopes and spatiality to produce a stimulating reading of Murray Bail’s fiction, especially the under-examined Holden’s Performance. This reader was pleased to have Edward Atiyah’s The Eagle Flies from the East brought to his attention (courtesy of Jacqueline Jondot) for its reversing of the Napoleon story in favour of a postcolonial perspective. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez looks at differences of race and language in Lorena Gale and George Elliott Clarke and how they confront the white francophone nationalism of Quebec and there’s a rather ingenious inspection of the Maltese connection in Poe’s ‘The Murders on the Rue Morgue’ by Kevin Stephen Magri. It is good to see some Pacific material in the collection (on Once were Warriors and the various treatments of the Parihaka story) and the usual spread of papers on Indian writers includes analysis of the TV series The Kumars at No. 42 and Meera Syal’s books. Leila Abouzeid gives a straightforward talk about ‘Becoming a Writer in Morocco’ and Kifah Hanna analyses the place of women during and after nationalist crises in Lebanon and Palestine. Gender and ethno-national identity provides the focus, too, for Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oyu’s look at the new generation of West African women writers.

In all, a rich assemblage of some unevenness. Some entries I am glad not to have sat through in conference mode; others clearly would have been enjoyable presentations but don’t stack up as carefully written papers for publication. The two volumes are worthy of including on library shelves for occasional dipping into.

Paul Sharrad