

An Honorary West Australian Remembers Bruce Bennett

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The news of Bruce Bennett's death brought back memories of over half a century ago, when I first met him. I was a Temporary Lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia for two years at the end of the 1950s. Like all other members of the small department I tutored in first year. Classes were small and relations between staff and students were close. One group that I used to look forward to meeting contained three young men of outstanding promise, who were to have distinguished careers. Malcolm Treadgold and Bruce Bennett both went on to Oxford as Rhodes Scholars and then became academics. The third was Alan Fels who was, like Treadgold, majoring in Economics: he was to become, not only an authority in his field of study, but also one of the best known figures in Australian public life and a television identity. Bruce's major study was in English, but I seem to recall that he also had a liking for History. What I do remember clearly to this day is his enthusiastic enjoyment of the literature we were reading, and his determination to do well at his studies. He was an ideal student.

In the late 1960s when Bruce came back to Perth from Oxford (bringing home a delightful English wife as well as an English degree), he was appointed to the English staff. As he had been during his student days, he was wholly committed to the task in hand, and no-one could have asked for a colleague more conscientious and co-operative – or, for that matter, more agreeable. I was back in Perth from 1963 to 1970, and so got to know him during this time when he began to develop an interest in Australian literature, which was to become so central to his later career.

Courses in Australian literature had not yet been established when I left Perth, and Bruce was to play a leading role in their establishment soon afterwards. Those who worked with him in those days will be able to testify to his leadership in this area and his later efforts to promote Australian Studies. From my perspective, in his early years there are two activities – which might be regarded as marginal by others – that ought to be emphasised: his editorship of *Westerly*; and his promotion of the writing of his colleague, short story writer Peter Cowan. In 1964, while Bruce was at Oxford, Peter had been appointed as a permanent Senior Tutor in English. This enlightened appointment, very much to the credit of the English Department, had significant consequences when a few years later it appeared that *Westerly* would collapse. The magazine, which had begun as a student publication of the Arts Union, had in 1963, thanks to a grant from the Commonwealth literary Fund, burgeoned into a quarterly published by the University of Western Australia Press. Anyone who has been involved

in editing a periodical in their spare time knows how hard it is to keep such publications going. In 1966 Peter, who felt the isolation of Western Australia keenly, took the initiative that saved the magazine. An editorial committee, three of whom were in the English Department, became responsible for the publication; although never named as editor or chairman, it was Peter who made the final decisions and dealt with the printers. In 1968 Bruce joined the committee, and was already immersed in the work of editing when I left. He and Peter became joint editors in 1975, and in 1978 they had the satisfaction of compiling *Westerly 21: an anniversary selection*, which was published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Before the electronic revolution, when the phrase 'the tyranny of distance' was all too relevant, printed periodicals contributed to cultural life in a way that may be hard to comprehend today. That was especially so in Western Australia, and that is why I draw attention to Bruce's editorship, which continued until he moved to Canberra in 1993.

When I had first arrived in Perth I had been surprised that Peter, whom I consider to be the most talented prose writer associated with the *Angry Penguins* group, was not more highly regarded on the local scene, and I tried to make his stories better known. Bruce formed a close relationship with Peter, and shared my view of his distinction. In 1986 he edited for Penguin a selection of Peter's stories under the title, *A Window in Mrs X's Place*; and in 1992, with Susan Miller he edited *Peter Cowan: New Critical Essays*, which was published by the University of Western Australia Press, in conjunction with the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature which had been created within the English Department. Both of us contributed to this collection, and our essays revealed an interesting difference in our approaches: I situated Cowan as a modernist while Bruce saw him as a regional writer. Perhaps because I was an 'Eastern Stater' (though I had married a West Australian and had even been the Vice-President of the local Fellowship of Australian Writers, I could never be more than an 'honorary West Australian'), I was less receptive to the claims for a regional literature, which so attracted Bruce. His view of the power of place in Australian writing is a central theme of a collection of his essays and reviews, published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press under the title *An Australian Compass* (1991).

After leaving Perth, I saw Bruce only occasionally, usually at conferences; and in recent years hardly at all, as age and infirmity have put me out of action. My general impression is that he was happy and fulfilled, and genuinely enjoyed the life he had chosen. He lectured and wrote extensively; but the long list of his academic appointments and publications is far from the whole story. He had a strong sense of public responsibility, willingly served on committees, took executive positions in organisations, and was always prepared to roll up his sleeves and tackle the administrative tasks that most of us try to avoid.

Bruce was a West Australian, through and through, but he travelled widely, was responsive to other cultures, and relished networking. At the back of my mind is a notion that he once considered becoming a diplomat before deciding to opt for the academic life. Certainly, he had all the skills needed for a diplomat; and, in a way, he did become an ambassador for Australian literature. His friendliness and sincerity made him welcome everywhere he went; and his open and sympathetic approach to the study of literature appealed to those at home and abroad who heard him lecture or read his

writing. He leaves behind many friends in many places, as this issue of *Coolabah* bears witness.