

A totara has fallen

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Abstract: A tribute to Geoff Davis as a committed Commonwealth scholar and promotor of Inclusive Education, Indigenous Rights and Climate Justice

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It was a shock to learn of Geoff's passing on 22 November, 2018. He and I were in regular email exchange since I, based in New Zealand, took on the role of Chair of ACLALS in 2016. Geoff — as a past Chair, as well as past Chair of European ACLALS, and a long-standing executive member of both — was a constant source of support and wisdom. I had emailed him in mid-November, 2018 and received a reply from his wife Ingrid to say he was in hospital and would be in recovery for a while. He sent his best wishes, and I sent mine in return, wishing him a smooth and speedy recovery. I would wait until hearing that he was better before contacting him about any more ACLALS matters, but knowing nothing of his illness, imagined that a period of enforced rest and recovery — as much as he would be wanting to keep as busy and active as ever — would see him better soon. The news that he had passed away, six days after that email from Ingrid, was almost impossible to believe, and the same sense of unreality continues to permeate the sadness of losing a dear and valued friend and colleague.

The European ACLALS conference in Istanbul, in 2011, is where we really started getting to know each other – but he was of course well known to me as a scholar and editor, especially with the Rodopi Cross/Cultures series, before that. I remember earlier being at both European and international ACLALS conferences where Geoff was elected Chair, then subsequently re-elected for second terms. His deep knowledge of these Associations was obviously recognized as invaluable, and his selfless willingness to continue serving in these roles — as well as staying on ex-officio after stepping down — were all things I benefited from enormously when I became international Chair. From 2011, meeting up with him at triennial and branch conferences was a highlight, and he always radiated a cheerful and enthusiastic presence. I have many happy memories of meals with Geoff in

the different conference locations around the world – a biryani in a little Indian restaurant in Istanbul, and after the conference a ferry ride to explore markets followed by lunch; meeting up again in Innsbruck, 2014, then at the international ACLALS conference in 2016 in Stellenbosch, where we shared a convivial dinner; and the same in early 2018 in Sydney, where he was keynote speaker and dynamic presence at the South Pacific ACLALS conference. The conversation was always marvelous, and I reveled in his wit, knowledge, insight, and his love of literature and the arts. Yet his keen intellect was always equalled by his genuine and generous interest in others, and his remarkable achievements by his personal humility.

Geoff was a tireless supporter of ACLALS and advocate for literature, the arts and culture in scholarly, political and activist sectors. For me, in the role of Chair, he was a constant support, someone to check in with, someone who had the history, the contacts and connections, and the political wisdom, and shared these generously throughout our time working together. Whether it was the administrative process of reaccreditation, or more creative and proactive work, Geoff was incredibly supportive and helpful. But I think his willingness to help was also a testament to how important he believed this association with the Commonwealth Foundation and Secretariat to be. He was an avid supporter of the value of the various Commonwealth forums into which ACLALS could have input and through which it could form collaborations, and he contributed enormously to these things himself.

Geoff recognized the current Commonwealth as extending beyond the old British Commonwealth, with Secretary-Generals from different regions; the first from Canada, and most recently from India and Dominica; and he valued the inclusion of nations like Mozambique, Rwanda, Namibia — not ex-British colonies — as well as PNG and Samoa. It was his fervent wish that Zimbabwe would rejoin. Zimbabwe was especially close to his heart: he had been a member of the Culture Cluster of the Commonwealth Organisations Committee on Zimbabwe, and was part of a delegation visiting Zimbabwe to report on the state of arts and culture there. In 2012, he co-authored the report, “Re-engaging with Zimbabwe through Arts and Culture — a Needs Audit for Commonwealth Countries”.

One of the opportunities ACLALS has, through its accredited Commonwealth status, is to be represented at the People’s Forum during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings. Geoff had represented ACLALS at CHOGM in Malta, 2005; Uganda in 2007; Trinidad in 2009; Sri Lanka in 2013; and Malta again in 2015. In 2018, he attended in London. He wrote in an email of his plans to attend sessions on Inclusive Education, Indigenous Rights, Climate Justice, and Renewing the Commonwealth — an indication of the breadth of his concerns, and his commitment to seeing these things prioritised in Commonwealth forum discussions. Afterwards, he wrote me an enthusiastic account of events:

“The master of ceremonies was a witty and very effective rap poet called Mr Gee, Ben Okri gave a very upbeat opening address (which you can see on Youtube),

there were assorted poets from places like St Lucia, Malaysia and Tonga [who gave] readings.”

“Numerous speakers came out in favour of the diversity of the organization, of its role as a debating forum for people from all over the world, and as a force for good in all sorts of areas. The flow of ideas seemed endless and the mix of people was quite unique and very stimulating.”

Geoff valued, and made the most of, the chance to collaborate with other Civil Society Organisations, and at this 2018 People’s Forum, he spent time with Catherine Cole of the Commonwealth Association of Museums, based in Canada. He and Catherine had “discussed all manner of ideas and projects” and had also “managed to have a brief conversation on the importance of culture with Justin Trudeau.” He consistently advocated for ACLALS, and for the role of arts and culture more generally, often at high political levels. He was very keen on the idea of a consortium of culture oriented Civil Society groups that would work together to impress the importance of culture as a means of advancing social justice within and between nations.

Geoff regularly attended meetings in London on ACLALS’ behalf, to the point where it was easy to forget that he was actually based in Germany, and that his travel to and from London was in his own time and at his own expense. He travelled, often in three or four widely disparate places in any one year. Photographs from 2018 suggest it was a typical year in that regard, showing him in Slovenia, in NSW, Australia, and Texas, US. I don’t know of anyone associated with ACLALS whose familiarity with so much of the Commonwealth, and arts and scholarship in and on the Commonwealth, exceeds Geoff’s. By way of his roles in ACLALS organisations and Commonwealth groups, as well as travel, conferences, collaborative projects, teaching, his own scholarship, and sheer intellectual energy, he epitomised the Commonwealth scholar and all that ACLALS stands for.

Geoff was a remarkable scholar and a mentor; a man who strongly believed in the social good that attaches to work in the cultural sector, and in the literature of commitment; and he believed in the need for culture and activism to work together. In fact, the last conference paper I heard him present, at the South Pacific ACLALS Conference, “The Two Canaries of Climate Change,” in early 2018, was a keynote address entitled “‘The Imagining of Possibilities’: Writers as Activists.” His work with Ganesh Devy and the Chotro conferences are further examples of his engagement with the intersection of scholarship and activism.

Geoff always had numerous “projects on the go.” Although officially retired, he was actively writing, publishing and delivering papers, and he managed to fit ACLALS and Commonwealth-related travel around these things. But much of the time he gave would and should normally have been family time. Over the Christmas and New Year period of 2017 coming into 2018, he and I worked together — via daily email exchange — on a grant that sought funding for a linked group of projects across different branches of

ACLALS connecting the power of story and storytelling to social integration and well-being, aimed towards groups of young people and others who risked or experienced disadvantage through social marginalisation. It probably made both Geoff and I very unpopular with our respective families as we worked on this at such a traditionally family time, but I will always appreciate his willingness to give that time, and his belief in what we were doing.

His emails were always seasoned with updates on the German and family social calendar, such as an imminent visit his mother-in-law for German Mother's Day (where there would be excellent cake), or Christmas celebrations, his planned travels for other family events or friends' weddings (and sometimes he wrote in the midst of travel), and his always witty commentaries on everything from the weather to political figures and events. He often seemed to be just about to go for a swim or have just come back from a swim. His sheer energy and joie-de-vivre was so compelling. And he also expressed a lot of pride in [his wife] Ingrid's writing. I know he was greatly looking forward to coming to New Zealand with Ingrid for the 2019 ACLALS triennial in Auckland, and he had emailed me about his excitement at the keynotes as their selection was shaping up. Like all who knew him, I felt his absence at the ACLALS conference very keenly.

A Māori proverb, marking the passing of someone of great importance, says “Kua hinga te totara i te wao nui a Tane” — The totara has fallen in the forest of Tane. But another, “Me te koteo mau kupenga,” refers to the post to which the net is attached. I like to think of Geoff's legacy as that post that will hold the net of ACLALS together.

Bionote: Chris Prentice was chair of ACLALS, 2016-2019. She researches and teaches postcolonial literatures at the University of Otago, New Zealand, and has been a member of SPACLALS since 1990, and EACLALS from soon after. She has been a South East Asia and South Pacific regional panel judge and then regional convenor and member of the international judging panel for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her publications include chapters in books published by Rodopi, and she co-edited *Cultural Transformations: Perspectives on Translocation in a Global Age* (Rodopi, 2010). Her editorial board memberships include Brill's Cross/Cultures series.