

OBITUARIES

PETER ALEXANDER

1949–2015



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRISTINE ALEXANDER

Emeritus Professor Peter Fraser Alexander died at the age of 65 on 13 January 2015. He had been elected to the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1994, the year in which his biography of Alan Paton appeared. In the same year he was appointed Head of the School of English at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). As this conjunction of events might indicate, Peter was an all-round academic, a good citizen of his profession, taking on major teaching and administration duties. At the same time he was extending his subject, leading its development through active and ambitious research and innovative teaching methods, and was regularly invited to participate at international conferences. While a tireless champion of the traditional strengths of English literary studies, he was sensitive to new developments: he introduced the first creative writing subject at UNSW, on the use of computers in creative writing. He was best known and will be remembered as a distinguished literary biographer and editor. His work is notable for maintaining outstanding quality over a wide, international range. Reviewers often commented on the clarity of his writing, his command of jargon-free narrative, and his unwavering capacity to privilege

the text and the writing subject. For this biographer, the writing subject always came first: English studies was a place where writers lived, a populated and multinational site.

Peter Alexander identified himself as an Australian citizen, but his work transcended his passport. His distinction as an academic lay in his ability to engage fully with several (Commonwealth) cultures and to make definitive contributions to the literary history of each. As a graduate student at Leeds University in the early 1970s he worked on the Irishman W. B. Yeats. At Cambridge in the late 1970s he went on to produce a definitive biography of the South African Roy Campbell, along with four volumes of Campbell's *Collected Works*, all published by Oxford University Press. Geoffrey Dutton wrote in 1982 that 'this fine biography gives a remarkably honest picture of this extraordinary man ... Alexander seems to have read everything and interviewed everyone available – with the great advantage of having the confidence of Roy's widow, Mary.' A biography of the self-described 'Anglo-African-Asian' William Plomer appeared in 1989, and a study of Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1992. Each of these major works is wondrously buttressed by conference papers, invited public lectures, articles, encyclopaedia entries, broadcasts, interviews and reviews. Reactions to Peter's work on Roy Campbell have included a photographic exhibition, a film script, two plays and a ballet. This response from creative artists in the wider community was clearly a source of gratification to him. His biography of Australia's unofficial poet laureate and, according to fellow poet Peter Porter, 'custodian of Australia's soul', *Les Murray: A Life in Progress* (1999) was published, immediately withdrawn because of a defamation action, appeared on the web in a pirated version, and was then revised, expanded and re-published in November 2000. Writing for the *Sunday Telegraph*, Clive James chose the biography as one of his three 'Books of the Year'.

Reaction from Alexander's peers to the *Les Murray* biography bordered on astonishment. Peter Steele concluded that 'Someone entirely ignorant of Murray and of his work could read the book and emerge instructed, in significant ways, about what makes Australia run – or hobble, or halt' (*Australian Book Review*, December 1999/January 2000). Peter Coleman similarly responded: 'it not

only tells you all you wanted to know about Les but were afraid to ask, it is also the best history of Australian letters since World War II' (*Adelaide Review*, November 2000). Stephen Harris selected as the biographer's particular skill: 'Alexander's technique of using the poetry as a form of complementary comment ... In effect, he creates a dialogue between the seemingly impersonal facts of his life and the potently subjective impressions conveyed by the poetry' (*The Listener*, 21 April 2001).

The biographical researcher met his public again in 2009, when Peter's edition of Alan Paton's selected letters was launched after he gave the Alan Paton lecture at the University of Natal. Perhaps the most revealing comment on this project came from a South African source: 'It is remarkable that, working from Australia (though with the help of willing assistants in this country), he has achieved such accuracy in such a vast number of details' (Colin Gardner, *Natalia*, December 2009). Someone more familiar with Peter Alexander's previous work would not have found anything remarkable here at all.

Peter's was a busy scholarly life conducted internationally. He was a much-travelled professional who found both energy and time to consider the larger questions about the relationship between Australian writers and Australian academics. In 1988 he organised a conference with his wife Christine at UNSW on this topic and attracted wide public attention and much comment. The subject of the writer's world dominated his interests and connected the very different times, places and cultures of Campbell, Paton, Plomer, the Woolfs, and Les Murray. His active promotion of African Studies in Australia and the Pacific (he was President of its Association from 1993-6) led to its third conference, at the Australian National University, in 1995. He held visiting appointments at the universities of Cambridge, Durham, Duke, North Carolina and Princeton. In 2003 he was awarded the Centenary medal for service to Australian society and the Humanities. He spent all but one year of his professional life of thirty-seven years at UNSW and was at work on the unpublished papers of Alan Paton when he died. Many students benefitted from his learning and supervision.

In 2011 Peter knew that his life was coming to an end. He was told to expect 'months, not years.' Nevertheless, he continued to travel the world and make discoveries. Two years after receiving this medical advice he and Christine set off for New Zealand, Tasmania, and Beijing (where he gave a paper on biographical theory to a conference of professors of English). They travelled around China by train, bus, aeroplane and bicycle, for a fortnight. This was followed by a conference in Durham, UK, organised around Christine's work on literary juvenilia and the Brontës. There were visits to Scott's Abbotsford and to Cambridge, as well as attendance at the Academy's conference in Brisbane. Plans for 2014 included a conference in Quebec. Peter's many friends and colleagues will be pleased to know that he had finished his Memoir (and Christine had finished her edition of Jane Austen's juvenilia). Such resilient, mutually-sustaining and equal partnerships are remarkable in any profession. Within the academic world, one must evoke the phenomenon of hen's teeth to find a suitable measure of probability.

It is obvious from all this that Peter Alexander was a determined, principled and dedicated professional to his fingertips. His published works are ample and eloquent testimony to those qualities. He also had a dignified, quiet, wry sense of humour. We last saw him driving off after a visit to our home on Mount Gibraltar a few months ago. Christine had already warned us that we might not see him again, and he was certainly looking drawn and very tired. Even so, he insisted on taking the wheel; he was a keen and expert driver who only four years earlier had driven across the Nullarbor and around Australia. We learned later that they arrived home safely but it was his last long-distance drive. Peter is survived by his wife Christine and their son Roland: their daughter Rebecca pre-deceased him.

CLIVE PROBYN FAHA