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In Memory of a Roving Scholar

Geoff Davis (1943 – 2018)

In the early hours of 22nd November, 2018, three days before his 75th birthday, our teacher, colleague and friend Prof. Dr. Geoffrey V. Davis died in Aachen. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a few weeks before; he underwent an operation that could not save his life, and after a short, hard battle lost out against a deadly antagonist that had taken him by surprise and plucked him out of an exceptional *vita activa* led with seemingly indomitable energy also years after his retirement. Our thoughts are with his wife Ingrid, his life companion of many decades, who was also by his side during his last weeks.

One of many vivid memories I have of Geoff Davis is that of a lecture on the exploits of the ‘roving reporter’ Egon Erwin Kisch in Australia delivered at the Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL) in Kiel in 2005 (and published under the telling title “‘One step on Australian soil and you’re history’: Nicholas Hasluck’s novel *Our Man K.*, Egon Erwin Kisch and the White Australia Policy” in 2007). With his inimitable style combining scholarly erudition, political engagement and ironical humour, Geoff quickly had the audience roaring at the inept attempts of befuddled politicians to keep Australia safe from the ‘communist threat’ they saw embodied in the outspoken critic of Nazi Germany, and made the former marvel at Kisch’s transnational engagement for social justice and his indomitable courage (having been banned from setting foot on Australian soil, Kisch jumped from the ship that had brought him to Melbourne, broke his leg after a six-meter fall, and later successfully engaged in a legal battle for his right to go on a nationwide anti-war lecture tour).

The connection Geoff set up in that talk between German literary history and Australian politics was by no means fortuitous; nor was his interest in social justice and the political role of literature and culture in countries like South Africa. Geoff actually entered academia through German studies; he wrote his PhD on the work of Arnold Zweig, the socialist-humanist writer persecuted by the Nazi regime who emigrated to Palestine and returned to the German Democratic Republic after the end of World War II. Geoff retained a vivid interest in German literature throughout his academic career which soon after came to focus on a quite different province of world literature, however.

Born in Birmingham in 1943 and educated at Oxford, Geoff Davis belonged to an initially quite small group of pioneer scholars who sought to establish the study of what was then still called “Commonwealth Literature” in Germany and internationally. His influence in and impact on this rapidly expanding field soon extended far beyond the position of foreign language lecturer that he held at Aachen University from 1966 onwards. He was one of the founders of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (GNEL/ASNEL) in 1989 and played a major role in

the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies both on a European level (he was Chair of EACLALS from 2002–2008 and from 2011–2014) and as International Chair of ACLALS from 2007–2010. He was co-editor of *Cross/Cultures: Readings in Post/Colonial Literatures and Cultures in English*, easily the most important and influential book series published in the field, and of *MATATU: Journal for African Culture and Society*, and author of a truly astonishing number of edited volumes, special issues and essays on African, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, South Asian, indigenous and Black and Asian British literatures and cultures. The two-volume *Festschrift Engaging with Literature of Commitment* (Rodopi 2012) pays ample tribute to the extraordinary contribution that Geoff, the “worldly scholar” (as the subtitle of the second volume aptly put it) had made to postcolonial anglophone literary and cultural studies – and testifies to a truly worldwide network of friends, colleagues and mentees that he built up during his long academic career. This career had by no means ended with his retirement; if anything, he had seemed to have become even more energetic, taking on new commitments as editor, conference organizer, and keynote speaker, and continuing his innumerable journeys across the globe that had already turned him into a legendary roving scholar in the 1980s.

In all these years, Geoff Davis truly kept a window onto the world open for many of us in German academia. His cosmopolitan academic interests and his firm commitment to the social responsibility of literature as well as of literary and cultural studies constantly reminded his audiences and readers of the far-flung transcultural and transnational connections linking up Anglophone literatures and cultures across the globe – and of the extraordinary diversity of local and regional contexts in which these literatures have their being in a globalized world. As Arundhati Roy might put it, there is now a Geoff-shaped hole in the universe for all those privileged to have known and to have worked with him. But there is also an inspiring legacy of a scholarly life lived to the full, based on deep and loyal friendship, untiring conviviality and burning intellectual engagement. This we will need to recall as we grope towards understanding our loss.

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