

Jan/Feb 2009

ASAA Newsletter Jan/Feb 2009

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Fourth International ASAA Conference Kandy, Sri Lanka, 2-5 December 2008, Suisse Hotel



The Association for the Study of Australasia in Asia held its Fourth International Conference at Hotel Suisse, Kandy, Sri Lanka on 2-5 December 2008. About 100 delegates from different countries including Australia, India, Hong Kong, Canada, Iceland, Spain, and from across Sri Lanka participated in the three day event.

The theme of the conference was "Australasia-Asia: Change, Conflict and Convergence." The subject was explored by scholars drawn from varied disciplines: literature, media, history, politics, philosophy, women's studies, science and even library studies. Keynote Speakers included Bill Ashcroft, noted exponent of post-colonial theory (Univ. of NSW/ Hong Kong); Susan Ballyn, Director Australian Studies Centre (Barcelona), Chelva Kanaganayakam, an eminent scholar and critic (Univ. of Toronto) and Suwendri Perera, well-known cultural theorist (Curtin University).



A notable feature of the conference was the presence of Australian indigenous artist Pampirla (Hanson Boxer), from Broome. For many Sri Lankan participants he provided a first encounter with an indigenous Australian. It was the first time they had ever heard the mellifluous tones of the didgeridoo – he was always ready to play for an audience.

After the ceremonial lighting of the lamp by the invited dignitaries, Professor Walter Perera, Chair of the Sri Lankan Organizing Committee, welcomed the eminent guests and delegates. He spoke of the Association's founding in Sri Lanka in 1995; the three conferences held in India over the past eleven years, the fourth now being held for the first time in Sri Lanka. He noted that the fears regarding security had been a problem but was



glad the Australians and other visitors had not been deterred.

Addresses followed by the Governor of the Central Province, HE Tikiri Kobbekaduwe, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya, Professor Abeygunawardena, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Kalinga Tudor de Silva; all three of whom applauded the choice of the historic city of Kandy as the venue of an international conference. Ms. Cecilia Brennan (Australian High Commission) outlined developments in the bi-lateral relationship and expressed the hope that cultural exchanges would expand. Dr. Cynthia vanden Driesen, the (Australian) President of ASAA, thanked her colleagues from ECU and all other Universities in Australia and overseas who had accepted the challenge to participate. She also read messages of good will from Archbishop of Perth, Roger Herft, warmly recollecting Kandy, the town of his birth, and also from the Sri Lanka born Professor David de Kretser, Governor of Victoria. Dr. R. K. Dhawan presented a Vote of Thanks. The Kandyan dancer's performance combining tremendous energy with sinuous grace, charmed the audience.

The inaugural session over, parallel sessions followed after a tea-break.. Some of the papers reflected on changes in the concept of Australian identity, and attitudes to



Fourth International ASAA Conference – continued

Australian landscape, attitudes to indigenous Australians and the development of a multicultural Australia. Two papers – one from an European scholar and the other from an indigenous Australian scholar, debated the implications of the Rudd Apology. Australian writing and Australian Aboriginal writing was discussed by Indian scholars and Malaysian scholars. Serge Walberg's paper struck a different and intriguing note in its analysis of the implications of the Australian call centres set up in India and the need for trade union rights, minimum working conditions, and legal protection. Readings by distinguished writers Yasmine Gooneratne, Meira Chand and Inez Baranay provided further intellectual and artistic interest.

Sue Ballyn gave the first plenary - a fascinating account of the problems faced in setting up the Australian Studies Centre at Barcelona University, which comprehended all the conference themes of 'change, conflict and convergence'. Beginning with acknowledging the work of Doirean Mac Dermott in introducing Australian studies into the curriculum, and her own interest as a post-graduate student in the field, she took her audience through all the ploys and strategies of the early years

and the varied stages of evolution to its present status as a respected and active Centre for recognized research. A superb finale to the first day's proceedings were provided by Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne's presentation of slides refracting glimpses of Sri Lanka's ancient cultural heritage.

The Australian High Commission hosted a cocktail party for the participants at the Hotel Suisse the same evening of a crowded but satisfying programme.

The second day began with an impressive plenary address by Bill Ashcroft. Having changed the original title of his paper to refract an emphasis on Australia: "Australian Literature and Alternative Modernities". As he put it he wished to explore "the somewhat outrageous idea of Australia as an alternative modernity", proposing to do this through examining its literature and other cultural production. Bill's use of examples from Australian art provided an innovative variation to the analysis of print texts and stimulating challenge to his audience. Examined through its literature and other cultural production, and in particular the ways in which it has been creatively adapted – ways that are similar to other post-colonial societies. This opening session was followed by a Panel Discussion between two distinguished ex-diplomats Nihal Rodrigo and Alison Broinowski – each discussing their perspectives on the changed global inter-actions in a century which could be described as "the Asian Century" with the rise of the influence of China and India.

A sumptuous lunch, was followed by a second plenary address presented by Chelva Kanaganayakam (Univ. of Toronto) on "Disciplining Difference: A Literary Perspective." He talked of the

necessity of placing the literary texts within their own theoretical matrix. The papers that followed ranged from issues of globalization, to Changes in Indo-European architecture, to challenges before Sri Lanka in the shape of an ageing population, the implication of cricket, and changes in new Englishes and interpretations of Sri Lankan productions of Shakespeare in the 19th century. Papers on Australian indigenous writers were balanced by a Paper on Michael Ondaatje and explorations of the phenomenon of Bollywood. This packed day was concluded with a cultural programme and a dinner for delegates, organised through the efforts of the Sri Lankan committee and sponsored by a well-wisher.



The third day of the conference was held at the Queen's Hotel – and the inconvenience of the transfer was more than offset by even more sumptuous meals and all of the multimedia arrangements being most efficiently transferred to another, impressive old-style colonial hotel.

Suvendrini Perera's thought-provoking plenary began a day which particularly highlighted the international nature of this forum: a Sri Lanka born Australian academic explored issues relating to change in a small Sri Lankan Community, while another traced the

theme in relation to an Icelandic writer; a young Spanish scholar explored the changing ideas of Europe, Sri Lankan, Indian and Spanish scholars presented papers on S.Asian/Canadian/Australian migrant Women's writing and women's health issues; another young academic presented an intriguing interpretation of Shakespearean productions in Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century. Preoccupations with issues of globalization as related to Australia and conflict case studies relating to Sri Lanka were balanced with literary studies and art. Julia Gross' presentation on "Australian literary blogs ... a review of the changed environment" attracted considerable kudos.

The highlight of the third day had to be Pampirla's (Hanson Boxer's) presentation of his experiences as an Aboriginal artist and community leader. The conference concluded with an informal panel discussion: Susan Ballyn and Baden Offord presided; invited comments from the audience helped summing up the varied experiences of an unusual but rewarding conference.

ASAA expresses its sincere thanks again in this Report to the efforts of the Sri Lanka chair – Walter Perera, and particularly to the members of the team Rajeeva Wijesinghe, Maduranga Kalugampitiya, Ranil Abeysekera and Tara Senanayake, who continued to work serenely, especially when emergencies developed along the way. A low key conference dinner concluded the academic part of the programme since the planned excursion to Pemberley and Haputale was detailed to leave very early on December 4.

The last event was hosted at Pemberley by Brendon and Yasmine Gooneratne. Arriving at the venue Pampirla exclaimed at the natural beauty of the place, "This is Heaven."

An informal discussion with the writers followed – on their ideas related to the conference themes. The scheduled paper By Vijaysree did not eventuate as she was prevented from travel due to the

emergency in India. The core of her Paper is presented below and represents a new and valuable opportunity for further networking in S. Asia.



Meeting with Minister for Higher Education



The Minister for Higher Education in Sri Lanka, Professor Viswa Warnapala, himself a noted academic with several scholarly publications to his credit, sent a message of good will to the ASAA conference

which was read at the opening ceremony.

Later he invited Cynthia and Ian vanden Driesen to Parliament House where the special focus of interest was the holdings of the library, with its ancient copies of Hansard and other valuable documents, which in the view of the Minister and Mr. Kuruppu, librarian of Parliament House, required a specialized project for ensuring their preservation for future generations of scholars.

The possibility for developing a project which could enlist Australian expertise to assist will be investigated with appropriate advice in

succeeding months.

The Hon Minister was, in past years, a student of Ian's at the University of Peradeniya.



South Asia Collective: An India Initiative (SACAI)

South Asia Collective is envisaged as a consortium of writers and scholars who engage with South Asia in their creative writing or critical thinking. It is an in-terdisciplinary forum that will bring together scholars of South Asia from across disciplines and create opportunities for synergy and innovative thought. It will meet its objectives by organizing annual conventions, focused seminars, work-shops; by launching a web-based discussion group, newsletter, and journal; and by supporting initiatives by members to network and form smaller action groups for collaborative research.

Membership in this association is open to anyone interested in any aspect of South Asia. Members need not be of South Asian origin, nor is it necessary that they be located in South Asian countries. It is sufficient that they are involved with South Asia in their writing, research, or teaching.

1. The objectives of the association include:
2. To promote a dialogue between and among
 - Scholars from different regions of South Asia.
 - 'Local' and 'global' knowledges on South Asia.
3. To encourage comparative studies of shared South Asian experiences.

4. To support initiatives to critically map the different regions of South Asia.
5. To explore indigenous knowledge systems and their efficacy in the con-temporary world.
6. To produce pedagogical resources to facilitate teaching/ learning of South Asia in the classroom.
7. To push for making an understanding of South Asia and its dynamics a part of early education in schools and colleges.

As the association gathers momentum, we are sure several other relevant areas for collective and collaborative exploration will emerge.

Writers and scholars interested in associating themselves with this initiative may contact

- C Vijayasree, Director, Osmania University Centre for International Pro-grammes, Hyderabad (vijaya_chaganti@yahoo.com) or
- T Vijay Kumar, Joint Director, Osmania University Centre for Interna-tional Programmes, Hyderabad (tvk2k4@gmail.com)

Forthcoming Events

THE 18TH NEW ZEALAND ASIAN STUDIES SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2009, Wellington, 6-8 July, 2009.

This will be an open, multidisciplinary conference. Participants are invited to submit panel or paper proposals presenting original research on any Asia-related topic. For more information, please see conference website: <http://www.nzasia.org.nz/conference.html>

Paper abstracts due by 15 March 2009 to the chair of the organising committee: stephen.epstein@vuw.ac.nz

MAJU BERSAMA The Australian Society of Indonesian Language Educators (ASILE) Biennial Conference, Sydney, 14-15 July, 2009.

ASILE is now calling for expressions of interest for papers and workshops at the 2009 conference. This is an excellent opportunity to contribute to and participate in a conference with a national audience interested in directions for the future of Indonesian language education. Small teams of presenters working together on projects are also encouraged to register.

Any queries, please contact: Andrea Corston phone: (08) 8683 4751, acorston@internode.on.net

POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION - RE-IMAGINING IDENTITY: NEW DIRECTIONS IN POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES, 6-8 May 2009 at Waterford Institute of Technology, Waterford, Republic of Ireland.

Keynote Speakers: Bill Ashcroft, Declan Kiberd, Neil Lazarus

For more information please contact:

Dr Gerri Kimber - gerri@thekimbers.co.uk or

Dr Marta Vizcaya Echano - martavizcaya@hotmail.com

Australian Scholar in India

Paul Sharrad (University of Wollongong) was in India for two weeks. He visited Jawaharlal Nehru University, Indira Gandhi National Open University and Jamia Millia Islamia (all in New Delhi), Ajmer and Chennai and gave a series of lectures on Australian literature and Indian fiction in February 2009. Paul has published a significant book on Indian fiction entitled *Postcolonial Literary History and Indian English Fiction*. Published by Prestige Books, it is priced at Rs. 800.

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Members may send in items of interest to the editor.

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