

Adventures of a Scholar Gypsy: The Life and Work, So Far, of Bruce King

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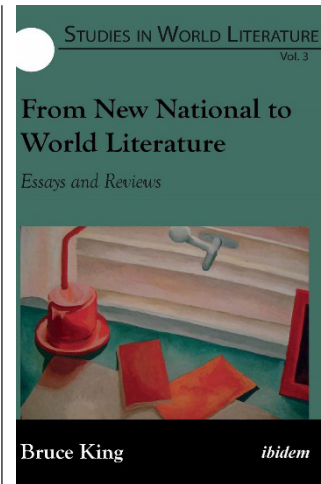
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*An Interesting Life, So Far: Memoirs of
Literary and Musical Peregrinations*
Bruce King
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*From New National to World Literature:
Essays and Reviews*
Bruce King
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Bruce King became a literary celebrity in India with the publication of *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (OUP, 1987). The book is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. The two books under review offer a broad view of what lies underneath.

After several false starts to the memoir, King pulled out all the stops and just let it flow. The result is a rambling narrative combining reminiscence, portraits – often waspish – of diverse personalities, confession, humorous anecdotes; out of all this the serious student of literature can extrapolate a fascinating history of modern literary studies and contemporary – mainly postcolonial – writing.



Born in 1933, of Russian Jewish stock, and named Alvin G (for Gilbert) King, he later chose to be Bruce, dropping the G altogether. At twelve he lost his father to a serious illness, and never found out what the original family name was; “King,” he surmises, was an immigration official’s gift.

His relations with his widowed mother were fraught with tension, her possessiveness pitted against his desire for freedom; but she did pay for his higher education and helped out when he married while a doctoral student. Childhood and adolescence were dominated by reading, jazz, and dreaming of escape. After a colourful academic career teaching and researching for decades in four continents, all the while keeping up his musical interests, playing the drums in various places, writing on jazz, dancing – wife Adele an enthusiastic and graceful partner – he longed for a secure professorship in America, but no university would have him; his peregrinations seem to have ended, leaving him a contented Parisian.

First step towards freedom: Columbia College, 1950-54. The faculty included such academic stars as Lionel Trilling, Richard Chase, Eric Bentley, whose attitude towards the rising New Criticism was dismissive. Trilling, great critic though he was, tended to be “haughty, pretentious,” with a “vicious tongue,” a volatile temper, and, it later came to light, a drink problem. King “asked in class for him to explain what he meant by saying something in a Wordsworth poem was ‘basic’ like an episode he alluded to [sic: in] was ‘basic’ and was told that if he threw me down the stairs and jumped on me that would be ‘basic’.”

“From the threat of throwing me down the stairs,” King wryly comments, “I learned something important about life, my literary and cultural heroes could be awful in real life, and it was time I grew up and stopped thinking of myself as unique. That might have been the most important lesson I learned at Columbia.”

To everyone’s surprise, King chose to pursue graduate studies in a red brick university in bleak, industrial northern England. The initial attraction of Leeds was the presence on the faculty of G. Wilson Knight, perhaps the most original Shakespearean critic of his generation. His first year-long stint at Leeds was spent taking advanced undergraduate courses, taught by Wilson Knight, Arnold Kettle, and the department head, Bonamy Dobree. Lectures could be unexpectedly entertaining: “Wilson was endearingly hopeless. His lectures on Tragedy brought out paradoxes and absurdities; he would start laughing and tears literally rolled down his cheeks. Lectures on Comedy were tragic, no one laughed or smiled or even found anything amusing.” King’s life would also change in a more intimate way when on board the trans-Atlantic ship he met his future wife, Adele, a first-rate scholar in her own right, specializing in Francophone literature.

But there was more: Leeds was about to revolutionize English studies, and King would enthusiastically join the revolutionaries when, newly married, he went for doctoral studies (1957-60). The head of the newly formed School of English,

result of a merger of the Literature and Language departments, was headed by the dynamic Yeats scholar, Norman “Derry” Jeffares. He expanded the curriculum to include Irish and American and Commonwealth literature, a pioneering move, and later, “Bibliographical Studies, Folklore, Stylistics, and Performance Theatre.” The Leeds School of English became an academic powerhouse, attracting international students, many of them from the new Commonwealth countries, and including both literature students and those interested in language teaching. This was long before Postcolonial Theory reared its head, or ELT and TESOL became a lucrative global industry. My colleagues will remember that in the sixties a number of young college and university teachers from this country took postgraduate diplomas from Leeds. Celebrity alumni included Wole Soyinka, Tony Harrison, and James Simmons, who was also a recipient of the Gregory Award, instituted at Leeds, as were Jon Silkin, John Heath-Stubbs, and Thomas Blackburn.

At the same time, Leeds sent out alumni to teach in far-flung postcolonial institutions. King’s doctoral dissertation was on Dryden’s plays, on which he published a book; his other studies of mainstream English Literature included books on *Coriolanus* and Marvell, a *History of Seventeenth-century English Literature*, and, among moderns, a biography of Robert Graves, whom he got to know in Deia, Mallorca, for years the Kings’ holiday destination. But he had imbibed a great lesson from Jeffares who was keenly “aware that English studies had to change to keep up with the new cultural and political world that was coming into being with the Cold War and decolonization” (*An Interesting Life*, 99).

After two unhappy years at Brooklyn College and the University of Calgary, King was hired by the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, for three years (1962-65), the first of several Commonwealth stints: he was Professor and departmental Head at the University of Lagos (1968-70); professor at Ahmadu Bello University, Nigeria (1973-76); and at Christchurch, New Zealand (1979-83). Other teaching stints took the Kings to Bristol; Windsor, Canada; Columbia, Missouri; twice to Paris; Stirling, Scotland; Florence, Alabama; Israel; and there were four research visits to India. Their daughter Nicole’s transnational upbringing made her “emotionally stateless,” certainly not an undesirable existential condition. Adele had the steadier academic career of the two: from 1986 to 2003 she rose from assistant to full professor at Ball State, Indiana, and was then made professor emeriti. By then, tragedy had struck the family twice: Nicole, a Bryn Mawr graduate, found work in a Paris art gallery, and was well settled there when her apartment block burned down, and she was one of those trapped in the blaze. Some years later, Adele was diagnosed with lung cancer; given just months to live, she commented wryly that she had had an interesting life, whence derives the title of Bruce’s memoir. She lost a lung in the prescribed surgery, but recovered to soldier on, genial and full of charm, for another twenty-three years. At the beginning of the present century, the Kings bought a newly

renovated flat in a quaintly attractive part of Paris, by the Canal Saint Martin in the 10^{ème} arrondissement, and made it their permanent home.

Bruce King had become a prolific producer of critical and scholarly studies on postcolonial writing: a biography of Derek Walcott and a book on his work in the theatre; *V. S. Naipaul* (1993, enlarged 2003); three books, all on Indian writing: the second, *Three Indian Poets: Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Moraes* (1991, enlarged 2005), and the third, *ReWriting India: Eight Writers* (2014); a general study, *The New English Literatures: Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World* (1980); and eight edited volumes on postcolonial literature. He thought a secure tenured professorship in a prestigious university would naturally come his way, but to his dismay, he found that the narrow politicization of literary studies had rendered him a misfit.

There is certainly a marked tension between the kind of criticism of New National or Postcolonial or World Literature produced by Bruce King and others of his ilk. For instance, the former Leeds lecturer and high level cultural functionary, Alastair Niven, whose doctoral thesis on Commonwealth Literature King had examined, and the postcolonial criticism that has appeared in the wake of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism. Scanning the Index pages of the two books under discussion, one is struck by the absence of any name associated with Postcolonial Theory other than that of Edward Said, in *From New National to World Literature: Essays and Reviews*, and that too for a summary dismissal of "simplicities based on Edward Saidian assumptions" that lead one to see "all forms of Western education, culture, and Christianity ... as imperialism." Said's work is of course much more complex than that of simplistic Saidians; and some of King's attitudes are somewhat contradictory. He complains that "Postcolonialism meant a Marxist, New Left, criticism of America and Western colonialism," while admitting that "The indirect support of the CIA for the new post-colonial literature in their early stages is well-known." Clearly, the CIA's shenanigans in the cultural sphere, not to mention the political sphere, can be deemed ample justification for criticism of America and the West. But King need not go into ideological criticism, for which he is ill equipped, to establish the value of the kind of "pure" lit crit he believes in. Such literary criticism is vindicated for the simple reason that it offers the reader a clearer impression of the qualities of a text examined in its specific context rather than in terms of an abstract theory. Theorizing has its own excitements, but if one wishes to get into the work of a writer, say, Naipaul, King's book's unassuming exposition would be a more useful introduction.

From New National to World Literature (henceforth, *FNNWL*) supplements King's other studies in the area. There is a neat historical and quasi-theoretical framing of the subject. He makes a clear distinction between the "old" criticism of New or Commonwealth Literatures, and the situation after the theoretical turn, with increasing numbers of scholar-critics from minority groups accommodated in their respective academic ghettos. A parallel development has been the supercession

of the Diasporic sensibility by transnationality fostered by globalization: “In a globalized world of easy transportation and communication and nations without high barriers to employment by foreigners there should no longer be diasporas in the sense of those who look back with nostalgia on a place of origin” (*FNNWL*, 503). One could add that with the growing interest in World Literature or Global Literature, in which degree programs are offered by numerous Western universities, literary studies will rely increasingly on the use of translations. This is a subject King has not gone into though.

FNNWL is divided into eight sections. The first overlaps with the section in the memoir about Leeds and Norman Jeffares. The eleven essays in the second cover both individual authors like Gabriel Okara and Soyinka alongside general topics like “The Emergence of African Fiction” and “African Literature and Aesthetics.” The third section, “New English Literatures,” deals with four broad topics. The six essays in the fourth section, “Australia, Canada, New Zealand,” deal mainly with individual authors, e.g., A D Hope and Margaret Atwood. Six of the nine pieces in the section, “West Indies,” are devoted to Derek Walcott, on whom King spent a number of years. The four pieces in the sixth section, “Internationalizing British Literature” deal with Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, David Dabydeen, Abdulrazzak Gurnah, and Mike Philips. Seven essays in the section, “Indian Literature,” mainly cover poets, but also Jeet Thayil’s celebrated novel, *Narcopolis*. The final section, “Muslims and Pakistan,” salutarily discusses novels that deserve more attention than they have so far received, e.g., Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), alongside well-known contemporary writers like Kamila Shamsie and Jamil Ahmed, and the talented poet, Alamgir Hashmi. But King makes a gaffe in linking Ali to the Pakistan movement. As Dalrymple’s essay on Karachi in *City of Djinn*s reveals, Ali did not want to go to Pakistan. On a British Council sponsored teaching stint in China at the time of Partition, he wanted to return to Delhi in 1948, but the Indian ambassador, K P S Menon would not let him on some flimsy pretext, forcing him to go to Karachi.

Readers will benefit from the generous bibliographies appended to most of the essays and reviews. More broadly, reading the criticism alongside the memoir will enhance one’s understanding of the way literature is produced out of milieus in which writers can rub shoulders, argue, and chat. King got to know most of the contemporaries he has written about. At times, he found himself caught up in the rivalries and animosities of writers. He found Ezekiel and the Bombay literary scene the most vibrant in India, and so when he asked P Lal, who ran Writers’ Workshop in Kolkata, for information, he was snubbed. But that does not forgive King’s mistaken reference to Lal as a Bengali Brahmo. Lal was a Punjabi who had settled in Kolkata and married a Bengali. Mention should also be made of what King’s memoir reveals of the political and social turmoil in postcolonial situations, particularly in Nigeria, where he was living at the time of the Biafran war. The conflict split writers into rival camps, caused the death of a few, and impacted their literary work.

Readers and scholars of postcolonial writing will welcome these two books, and wish the copyediting and proofreading had been less atrocious. Even after suffering a stroke, and bereavement – Adele passed away in 2018 – King, “grossly overweight” in his own description, remains clearheaded and full of life. The last time I met him, he was planning a book on the sea-change wrought in English writing by writers with a Third World background. I hope he finishes it soon.