

Ken Arvidson 1938-2011

Jan Pilditch

Kenneth Owen Arvidson was a local man and, one is driven to suspect, knew everyone and everything of the wider Waikato region. Born in Hamilton, Ken became a member of the English Department at Waikato University in 1974 where we were lucky enough to keep him for 28 years and more. He maintained his interest and connections with the scholarly business of the university during his retirement and will be sadly missed by friends and colleagues throughout New Zealand and beyond.

Ken had a distinguished academic career and was known all over Australasia for his enduring contributions to learning and scholarship, and perhaps more importantly for his poetry. He completed a Master of Arts degree on John Ruskin at the University of Auckland, still, he once told me, the definitive work on the subject. In 1967 he took up a lectureship in English at Flinders University, South Australia where he worked for four years. Syd Harrex from Flinders has subsequently attested to Ken's role in 'bridging the Tasman through comparative studies of Australian and New Zealand Literature'.

In 1971 he moved to the University of the South Pacific, in Suva, Fiji, where he developed innovative programmes in English and what was then Commonwealth Literature. When he moved to Waikato University he maintained an interest in Pacific literature and wrote his foundation study 'Aspects of Writing in the South Pacific' which was published in *Mana* in 1974. Other essays followed, so that Professor Rod Edmund of the University of Kent once described Ken's role in the emergence of the field of 'New Literatures in English' by saying that

‘together with Albert Wendt and Subramani he was one of the midwives of Pacific Literature’. In addition to Ruskin, Ken’s interests included Gerard Manly Hopkins, John Henry Newman and other Victorian writers. In recent times, he turned his attention to the colonial documents of the Waikato and became the General Editor of the Early Waikato Series. His edition of Eldon Gorst’s *The Maori King* appeared in 2001 and latterly he was working on a critical edition of the journals of Benjamin Yate Ashwell, a Church Mission Society (CMS) missionary who served in the Waikato between 1835 and 1865.

Former students attest to ways in which Ken fostered the love of literature in countless graduates. Dr Michelle Keown, now a senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, continues to pursue her interests in New Zealand and Pacific literatures, and Dr Stuart Murray, a senior lecturer in Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Leeds who came to New Zealand to write his PhD thesis under Ken’s supervision, described Ken as the ‘perfect supervisor’ and a ‘model of how the job should be done’. To a very long list could be added Associate Professor Juniper Ellis of Loyola College, Maryland; Dr Kirstine Moffat, senior lecturer, University of Waikato; and many other colleagues who have benefited from Ken’s quiet wisdom and assistance with their work and careers.

Above all, Ken was an acknowledged reader and a thinker. His edition of Lauris Edmond’s poetry (*Lauris Edmond: Selected Poems 1975-2000*, Bridget Williams Books, 2001) was described by Lawrence Jones as ‘an excellent and accessible selection from one of our truly popular poets, with a clear and graceful introduction that explains both its popularity and its quality’. Ken’s willingness to share his knowledge and ideas led directly to the creation of courses on New Zealand literature in universities around the world. Under his editorship, from 2000 to 2004, and together with Sarah Shieff, the current editor, the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* was transformed into the forward-thinking

international journal it is today. Ken was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Waikato in 2006.

Ken's acumen and abilities were recognised beyond New Zealand's shores. From 1994 to 1996 he chaired the South Pacific Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies (SPACLALS) and was a Research Associate at the prestigious Centre for Research in New Literatures in English (CRNLE) at Flinders University, Australia; he was also an Associate Member of Darwin College, Cambridge, England, and a Professional Associate at the East-West Center in Honolulu. He represented New Zealand at international literary conferences and festivals in company with the finest writers and academics. On one memorable occasion he attended the International Literary Symposium hosted by the East-West Center with Janet Frame and Allen Ginsberg. The poem which subsequently emerged from the experience was read at the Commemorative Event for Janet Frame held at the New Zealand High Commission in London. Ronald Tamplin, formerly of Waikato University and later at Exeter University, commented that 'the poem left anecdote behind, becoming insightful'. At the invitation of External Affairs, he presented at the Australian National Word Festival in 1985 and at the First Congress of the American Association for the Study of Australian Literature at State College, University of Pennsylvania in 1987. More recently, in 2003, he recalled the late eminent Robert Creeley, as an American of the Rocky Mountain School, visiting Hamilton for the first time. That work was later published as 'Robert Creeley meets the Sentimental Bloke: A Momentary Encounter between New American and Old-fashioned Antipodean Poetics'.

Nationally and internationally Ken is acknowledged as a poet. Waikato University was a mere ten years old when Ken moved here in 1974 and in 1989 when the university celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary Ken was commissioned to write a lyric sequence to commemorate the event. The result, 'A Generation

of Age', with music by Heather Kerr, was performed by the University Choir in the Lady Goodfellow Chapel on 16 September 1989 to high praise. He began publishing in journals and magazines in the 1950s and received the first of many awards for his poetry in 1963 when he was awarded the Macmillan Brown Prize for Writers, placing him among New Zealand's most distinguished literary figures. His collected early poetry was published by Oxford University Press in 1973 as *Riding the Pendulum: Poems 1961-1969*. His poetry has appeared in literary magazines nationally and internationally, and has been anthologised in Australia and Japan, as well as in all of the major anthologies of New Zealand writing since the early 1970s. Ken's poetry often conveys loss and suffering, even foreboding, but on the back cover of *Riding the Pendulum* the writer comments that the poems:

all demonstrate the author's gift for the evocative image, the haunting phrase, the delicate cadence; and all through is revealed a natural lyricism ... But for all that, these are not sombre poems, and the pervasive idealism running through them is tempered by an equally pervasive irony which moderates the ideal, rather than destroying it, and sets it in some clear relation to reality.

Ken is remembered in so many ways, by so many people: as a husband and father by those closest to him; as a friend by those who have good reason to remember his many kindnesses; as a colleague; as a gardener; and as a staunch New Zealand man; but underlying these memories will be Ken's wonderful sense of irony that brought such light and humour to life. Vince O'Sullivan wrote that, within Ken's poetry, 'one has the sense of the whole man, creative writer and scholar and alert social commentator, attending to the most important cultural developments of his country and his time'.

Vale Ken.