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Sue Ballyn

### Circling the Roundabout at Bangalow

I cannot remember where we were coming from, or maybe going to, but I do remember the beautiful countryside we were driving through. A roundabout lay ahead of us and, after a few minutes, I realised we were going round in circles and I asked why ... "You don't recognise it, not even where we are?", "No, should I?" "Yes", came the firm answer. At that moment the penny dropped. I had just read the *Roundabout at Bangalow* by Shirley Walker and loved it, so much so, I had put it on the reading list for the following academic year<sup>1</sup>!

I first met Shirley while still a student in 1981. She, and her husband Les, arrived in Barcelona on the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 1981, the night of the attempted coup by Colonel Antonio Tejero and other military high rankers! She and Les could not understand why the city streets were totally empty of both people and traffic. When they arrived at their hotel, nobody was at the reception desk. All the reception and main hall staff were crammed into the back office watching television! Eventually, they could check in after being told about exactly what was going on in the country.

I was later introduced to Shirley by her close friend Doireann MacDermott, Head of the English and German Department at the University of Barcelona, and who had founded what was then called Commonwealth Studies now Postcolonial, in Spain. We spent some time talking and I took to her immediately. Little was I to know that eventually, both Doireann and Shirley were to hatch plans that would directly involve myself.

Some time between 1981 and 1986 a good friend and colleague of Shirley's came to visit us in Barcelona. This was Julian Croft, a very talented poet and university Professor. I remember the wonderful lecture he gave to my English Poetry students and also the fact that we introduced him to Orujo or fire water. The name of the snifter in English is self-explanatory. On trying it, he observed "If I were to pour that on my back yard, it would ignite!". I later learned that Shirley had asked Julian to suss me out as a prospective candidate for an Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) familiarisation grant. The grant was also part funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The hatching being carried out by Shirley and Doireann MacDermott was close to completion! Around Easter of 1987, I received a letter inviting me to take up the Familiarisation Grant. Shirley signed it as the then president of ASAL.

I landed at Sydney Airport in July 1987 and made my way to the connecting flight to Launceston, Tasmania, where the yearly ASAL conference would take place. The small departure lounge was already half full when I arrived, and looking around, I guessed that many were conference delegates. Here, I was to meet people who would become mentors

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<sup>1</sup> Walker, Shirley. 2003. *Roundabout at Bangalow*. St. Lucia (QLD): University of Queensland Press.

and firm friends over the years, Geoff Doyle and Bruce Bennett among them. Shirley quickly spotted me and soon introduced me to many people in the departure lounge. As Shirley used to say on one of our regular calls to each other, "You and I go back a long way". Tasmania fascinated me and was to become the focus of my research for some twenty years. So, thanks to Shirley, I made many friends and built up a network of contacts in Australia. Thanks also to her for opening up a research track that has become the *Neverending Story*<sup>2</sup>.

Over the years, we spent quite some time together at conferences, and later, I became a yearly visitor to Byron Bay, which was not far from where Shirley lived. When time allowed, we saw each other. I particularly remember one EACLALS conference in Nice<sup>3</sup>. The Conference excursion was to a small village high up in the mountains behind the city. We were told there would be spectacular views down to Nice from there. I cannot remember the name of the place, as I think the experience has led me to forget it! Two coaches loaded up, and we travelled through the city, suburbs and later countryside for a while. Then, we began a steep climb up the mountainside. Shirley was sitting beside the window, which was a blessing given what we encountered. Deep in conversation, she turned towards me and basically had her back to the window. We were now into one hairpin bend after another on a very narrow road. The bends had to be negotiated in three or four manoeuvres. The first conference coach was ahead of us so we could see exactly what the driver had to do to get around the bends. At one stage, he pulled so far out that the back wheels just touched the edge of the road, leaving the back of the bus exposed to the precipice. I glanced over Shirley's shoulder, and there, right below us, was the wreckage of a car. It was not the only one we saw on our way up! Practically everybody on the bus had gone silent, and the sense of anxiety seemed almost palpable! Suddenly a voice said "Headlines tomorrow, the whole executive of EACLALS killed in bus accident" there was an explosion of laughter and up and up we went. When we got to the top, a colleague, Kathleen Firth, came over and said, "You know what the man in the little café there said? We are the first coaches ever to have come up here!" Later, some delegates were seen returning to base cross country down the steep slope!

Shirley was a truly extraordinary woman. She was incredibly demanding of herself with an exceptionally keen sense for self-criticism, which academia seems to have largely lost today. She did not mince her words when the occasion demanded straightforward speaking. Still, she was gentle, kind, affectionate, and generous to a degree, and she was loved and admired by many people both in Australia and Europe.

Shirley was brought up in the Northern Rivers of New South Wales and spent the last years of her life there. However, for reasons that will become evident, her heart and sense of home were for Armidale, where she lived through the most fulfilling years. It was here, during the Second World War that she trained as a teacher at Armidale Teachers' College. Could she possibly have foreseen that she would become renowned as a university lecturer and writer? Throughout her life and achievements, she remained humble and unpretentious. Little could she have known then that she would have a prestigious academic career, becoming the first person in her family to go to university: the University of New England.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Ende. 1979. Stuttgart: Thienemann Verlag.

<sup>3</sup> EACLALS, The European Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies.

She won prizes both for her work as an undergraduate and postgraduate. Here, she was to become the first PhD candidate to defend a thesis in Australian Literature at the university<sup>4</sup>. Her thesis was on the work of Judith Wright. It was later published as *The Poetry of Judith Wright: A Search for Unity*<sup>5</sup>. To this day, I still think it is the most nuanced, sensitive yet critically insightful work on Wright's writing. She then became a tenured lecturer in the English Department at the University of New England, her *alma mater*.

There is no doubt in my mind that Shirley, together with Bruce Bennett, Veronica Brady, Laurie Hergenhan and John Barnes, formed the influential cohort of writers, critics and lecturers in Australian Literature that enthused students in Australia, China and Europe to study in the field. Shirley worked alongside Doireann MacDermott to spur Spanish students forward in the area. As a result, she became a regular visitor to Barcelona and Oviedo in Asturias.

However, Shirley had another broach on her jacket: she was a superbly talented creative writer. *The Ghost at the Wedding: A True Story* is probably my favourite if pushed to choose only one<sup>6</sup>. It won the 2009 Asher Literary Award, was nominated for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Non-fiction in 2010, and won the Nita B. Kibble Literary Award in the same year. The book received accolade after accolade; poignant, powerful, written with great intelligence and lyricism. It is indeed all those things and so many more. It follows in the narrative line of the autobiography *Roundabout at Bangalow*, a personal memoir but this time a biography of Shirley's mother-in-law Jess over three generations. It covers two of Australian history's most shattering events: the First and Second World Wars. For me, what makes it so different is that the book is so much more about the harrowing lives of the women left behind. The battles fought on the home front to feed children, help the war effort, maintain hope for their mens' return yet the wrenching fear that, at some time, the fateful telegram would arrive announcing the death of a husband, brother, uncle, nephew, boy-friend. The list is long.

The work does not spare the reader by enthroning the female voice in romantic rhetoric but describes war in harsh, unrelentingly brutal terms; the horror of the battle of Gallipoli against the Turks or the Kokoda Track campaign, an important series of battles fought by the Australians in the Second World War with the average age of soldiers standing at eighteen. The research behind the book is meticulous and wide ranging and took Shirley as far back as the Boer War out of which came work on Breaker Morant. *A Ghost at The Wedding* has thus become one of the most insightful memoirs of Australia's contribution to both World Wars and is both a major work of Australian Literature and of Australian History.

Shirley Walker's death sees the passing of a major academic figure and writer and an immensely determined woman who helped many like myself.

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<sup>4</sup> Shirley and I shared in common defending a thesis on Australian Literature. In my case the first PhD on the subject in Spain. I used to tell Shirley how angry I would get when researching for the thesis, and people would ask what I was doing. When I replied Australian Literature, they would remark that they did not know there was any!

<sup>5</sup> Walker, Shirley. 1980. *The Poetry of Judith Wright: a Search for Unity*. Melbourne: Edward Arnold.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, Shirley. 2009. *A Ghost at The Wedding: A True Story*. Camberwell (VIC): Viking Penguin.

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