

Patrick Wolfe, my ‘Bondhu’: In memoriam

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Some deaths are crueller than others. The untimely death of my friend Patrick Wolfe (b. 1948) in Melbourne on 18 February 2016 robbed the international scholarly community of a superb researcher who would have surely given us many more books and articles of first-rate scholarship if he had been, as they say, spared. Patrick was born and raised in England – his last book, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (2016), acknowledges the intellectual gifts of the ‘Jesuits of my boarding-school unhappiness, who blended their sadism with critical rigour’. By the time I met him, he had won the Faculty Prize of the Arts Faculty of the University of Melbourne for an honours thesis in Indian Studies and was preparing to go to London to pursue a doctoral degree in social anthropology. Personal circumstances returned him to Melbourne armed with a Masters in his chosen subject. He began research for a Melbourne PhD that he completed in 1995. Through a variety of peculiar circumstances, I ended up being the formal and final supervisor of his doctoral dissertation though, needless to say, I received more intellectually from our exchanges than he.

Patrick’s first book, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, published in 1999, was a remarkable study relating the birth of several anthropological theories, including the idea of an Aboriginal ‘dreamtime’, to practices of the settler-colonial state in Australia. It was not surprising that it led to many stimulating debates both in Australia and overseas. Not all agreed with Patrick but there was no doubt about the arrival of a powerful scholar with an imaginative, analytical and original mind whose commitment to the idea of justice was unshakable.

Patrick's domestic and international acclaim followed. He was feted around the world, invited to lecture at various venues in different countries, offered prestigious fellowships at universities such as Harvard and Stanford. In Australia, he held a variety of research and teaching positions at the University of Melbourne, Victoria University, and La Trobe University. Patrick now began to take a serious interest in comparative studies of settler-colonial societies. Out of that effort came his recent outstanding study of race and racism across a range of countries including the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa and Israel. Patrick was by now a distinct voice in the fields of his specialisation. An Australian friend recently wrote to me, mourning Patrick, that he was 'one ... [of the] truly rare spirits who allow you to catch a glimpse of a better world'.

Patrick was enviably erudite and an impeccable researcher in the fields that interested him. What really illumined and brought life to his erudition, however, was his unusual and sometimes unfashionable intellectual courage. We have made a cliché of the expression 'speaking truth to power'. Oftentimes, inspired by the likes of Michel Foucault, we even question whether 'truth' could indeed be separated from the workings of 'power'. Patrick grew up as part of the global generation that got mesmerised by Foucault's scepticism; but he never fully succumbed to the discreet charms of the French master. Not because he could not appreciate the subtleties of postmodern analyses; but because, being an extremely knowledgeable and conscientious historian of colonial rule and race relations, he was convinced that there are certain moments in human affairs – and they constitute, sadly, not a small number of instances – when power assumes such arrogant and brazen forms that it wraps itself up in all kinds of falsehoods about the oppressed and their pasts. At such moments, the only way to make the powerful squirm is to tell the truth. An enemy of oppression and discrimination until his last breath, Patrick never reneged on what he had come to see as his essential duty: telling the truth about the past. It did not always make him popular. I sometimes wondered if it were his uncomfortable views that made it impossible for him to obtain a permanent academic position, but whatever it was, I have never seen him lose his sense of humour or his spirit of generosity over it.

Patrick and I met, as I said, as two young scholars in Indian Studies. I stayed with Indian Studies, he moved on. But he never lost his interest in what he learned about India, and always retained some knowledge of my own language, Bengali, that he had learned at Melbourne University. My copy of *Traces of History* that I received as a New Year gift from him bears an inscription in Bengali, addressing me as 'bondhu', the word for 'friend'. And it even uses the Bengali word for 'but' – 'kintu' – as a way of gesturing to the 'yes, but' game that we always played while arguing with each other.

Many will miss arguing with Wolfe. For such a good sparring partner is rare in academic life. Even rarer is the generosity, kindness, intelligence, knowledge and humanity which my *bondhu* radiated in debates. Not just in debates. Patrick's humanity, made even richer by his terrific sense of humour, was in evidence in everyday relationships as well. I remember one occasion in the late 1980s when I was a lecturer at Melbourne University and Patrick a struggling graduate student (who was also then the father of two boys) of Patrick suddenly turning up at my door around midnight. He looked like he needed something. 'What's the matter?', I asked. 'Could I borrow that blue shirt of yours', he asked. Surprised, I said, 'Yes, of course, but why?' I will never forget the reply he gave me: 'so-and-so is in trouble, and I have to attend court tomorrow to testify to his character. But I have no good shirt to wear'. That was Patrick: kind, humorous, erudite, sharp in arguments, but always ready to fight for the underdog, in borrowed clothes if need be! How could one resist the charms of this remarkable man? He was indeed my *bondhu* for life.

Many have mourned Patrick's untimely and sad departure. The gap he left in the hearts of his friends is simply irreparable.

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