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A Spurr to abandoning the literary canon

October 28, 2014 1.03pm AEDT

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Most people had little call to know of University of Sydney poetry professor Barry Spurr until a series of his emails were published by New Matilda. The messages contained racist slurs, misogynistic
attitudes, and viewpoints that did not accord with the intelligent and enlightened perspective that we might expect of a senior academic.

The professor was hired as a consultant for the federal government’s National Curriculum Review.

Spurr has claimed his use of offensive terms were part of a “whimsical linguistic game”.

Yet the broader ideas expressed in his correspondence about multiculturalism and Indigenous peoples seem to reinforce his professional views about what kinds of literature are worth studying.

One of Spurr’s recommendations to the National Curriculum Review was that there should be “greater emphasis on dealing with and introducing literature from the Western literary canon”, including knowledge of the Bible.

In one of the emails published by New Matilda, Spurr argues that:

> [t]he impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on literature in English in Australia has been minimal and is vastly outweighed by the impact of global literature in English and especially that from Britain, on our literary culture.

Spurr observes that the Californian school curriculum:

> does not ONCE mention native Americans and has only a very slight representation of African-American literature (which, unlike Abo [sic] literature, actually exists and has some distinguished productions).

Spurr’s email seems to suggest that the Californian curriculum is correct to exclude Native American literature in the same way that Indigenous Australian writing should be absent from the Australian curriculum.

Although, given that Spurr claims that Aboriginal literature does not actually exist, it’s a conundrum as to how it has been able to feature excessively (by his standards) in the existing curriculum he critiques.

While Spurr concedes that African American writers have produced some “distinguished” works of literature, his comments seem ignorant of important Native American writers including Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, and Sherman Alexie. But perhaps nominations for the Pulitzer Prize, American Book Awards and National Book Award aren’t sufficient distinctions by Spurr’s criteria.

Likewise, it’s astounding to think that an Australian literature professor is not aware of highly-regarded Indigenous Australian writers including Alexis Wright (winner of the Miles Franklin Award), Melissa Lucashenko (winner of the Dobbie Prize), and Kim Scott (winner of the Miles
Franklin), for a start.

The trouble with the literary canon

But perhaps it’s not that Professor Spurr is unfamiliar with Indigenous writers or the calibre of their novels and poems, but simply that he cannot accommodate them within the narrow conception of the Western literary canon that he wishes to uphold.

His scholarship concentrates on early modern poets, including Donne and Milton, and the influence of religion on poetry, as in his books on T.S. Eliot and Christianity and representations of the Virgin Mary in English poetry.

The traditional literary canon marked out particular texts as more valuable than others. These were the kinds of books that were “worthy” of inclusion in school and university courses: books that any educated person ought to have read.

The canon was largely comprised of dead, white, male, middle-class authors. This, not unsurprisingly, reflected the qualities—apart from being deceased—of those who were sufficiently socially advantaged to determine what “good” literature was.

For the past half century, the canon has been called into question for its exclusion of writers who do not fit this privileged mould. Feminists, people of colour, and other socially marginalised groups have challenged the canon in a variety of ways.

First, by arguing for the inclusion of works by women writers and writers of colour who had been overlooked. Second, by attempting to create new canons featuring works by writers from these neglected groups. Third, by dismantling the concept of the canon, and the idea that there can be any objective list of “Great Books”, altogether.

Being mindful of the power structures behind canon formation does not mean that students of literature no longer need to be familiar with the plays of Shakespeare. However, acknowledging the biases involved in selecting “great” books and the way these shift over time leads most literature lecturers to teach a wider range of fiction and poetry than would have been the case when English literature was first taught in prestigious universities.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the study of Classics was considered a more worthwhile endeavour than the study of English literature. Ancient Greek and Roman literature were the educational province of the elite, in comparison with English literature that the working classes could read.

Spurr suggests that the inclusion of literature with Indigenous and Asian influences in the school curriculum distracts from the grand goal of “dealing with and introducing literature from the Western literary canon”.

It is hard to imagine why we would want to rigidly impose the problematic concept of the Western canon on school students, especially when school teachers have a more practical understanding of what kinds of texts work in the classroom.

It may well be that contemporary novels like Native American Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian and the children’s fiction of Indigenous Australian storyteller and inaugural Australian Children’s Laureate Boori Monty Prior are what Australian schoolchildren need to be reading in a multicultural society in which professors still might refer to Asians as “chinky-poos” and Indigenous Australians as “human rubbish tips”.

Literature  Books  Barry Spurr