**Our Friend Joe O’Connell (1940-2012)**

*William Radice remembers Joseph T. O’Connell, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto, who died on 6 May 2012, aged  71.*

‘How was the Edinburgh Tagore Conference?’

‘Very good. I thought, after so many Tagore conferences, that it might be a bridge too far. But it turned out to be a wonderfully lively and imaginative event. It was particularly good to meet and hear so many younger scholars – not just old-stagers like me.’

‘Joe would have loved that.’

Those words are from a transatlantic phone conversation I had with Dr Kathleen O’Connell on the evening of the day that I heard that her husband Professor Joseph Thomas O’Connell had suddenly died. How right she was. Joe would have delighted in the gathering at Edinburgh Napier University, 4-6May 2012. He would have seen the establishment of the new Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies in Edinburgh as a beacon for the future. He knew, from his 47-year-long marriage to the Tagore scholar Kathleen O’Connell, from the two Tagore conferences that they jointly organised in Toronto in 1986 and 2005, from his deep involvement with Bengali culture in both India and Bangladesh over many years, and from his acute understanding of Tagore’s debt to religion and poetry in pre-nineteenth century Bengal, that it is vital that everything that Rabindranath Tagore stood for should be well understood by present and future generations.

Joe had been much in my mind during the conference, because in a poetry reading I gave as part of it I included a poem that I wrote for the 2005 Toronto conference. Kathleen and Joe published the poem at the end of their volume of papers from the conference, *Rabindranath Tagore: Reclaiming a Cultural Icon* (Visva-Bharati, 2009), writing in their introduction: ‘How then should Rabindranath Tagore be interpreted sixty-seven years after his death? What might he now wish to say or have others say and do? “Talking at Night to Rabindranath”, a poem by William Radice, composed and recited in the midst of the Toronto Tagore conference, leaves us without a definitive answer from our ever-novel iconic figure himself.’ As a scholar of great precision and subtlety, Joe knew that there are no simple answers to anything. Yet he was also a man of strong ideals and principles, and he knew from his study of world religions how indispensable icons and images are. In that same introduction, he and his wife wrote: ‘Our human world is a world shaped by symbols, by images. We are bound to select from and simplify the infinite complexity of what we perceive. Somehow we must choose and act, must decide what to value and strive for, what to fear and guard against. For what can be quantified, we may have recourse to computers and their algorithms to enable us to select, simplify and act. For what is humanly meaningful, individually and collectively, for what is imbued with feeling and integral to who and what we know or imagine ourselves to be, we resort to more open, multivalent and suggestive symbolism, to images.’

As I recited my poem in Edinburgh, I recalled how in Toronto Joe had capped it with an improvised poem of his own in perfectly rhymed couplets. I was staggered by this, but when I congratulated him afterwards, saying that it had revealed an extraordinary talent that I knew nothing about, he modestly dismissed it as a ‘party game’ that he had learnt as a student at Harvard. Party game or not, his feat evoked a youthful brilliance that he never lost. I’m surprised now to learn that Joe was born on 6 June 1940: he seemed much younger, because he was always young at heart.

As well as being one of the best and kindest men I ever knew, he was also one of the most handsome. Tall and straight and with a rich head of hair, he was every inch the Irish-American: courteous and witty, with honesty and charm in his clear hazel eyes. I wasn’t surprised when Kathleen told me that it was ‘love at first sight’ when she met him after first acquiring him as a pen-pal, when she, just out of college in Milwaukee, was working as a Catholic volunteer in British Honduras, while he had started graduate studies in the Religions of South Asia at Harvard. Theirs became a great marriage, striking all who knew them as one of the best that it is possible to achieve: warm and supportive, with strong areas of mutual intellectual interest, and a tender pride in each other’s – and their children’s – achievements. I first got to know them and their three children, Deirdre, Mark and Matthew, when he invited me to speak at the Tagore conference he organised in 1986, and I stayed in the basement of their house on Olive Avenue, Toronto. It was my first visit to North America, and I couldn’t have hoped for a kinder introduction. In addition to learning more about Tagore, I learnt a lot about Toronto and Ontario and Canada and the country’s commitment to multiculturalism; I discovered the artists known as the ‘Group of Seven’ and their wonderful tradition of landscape painting; and I even learnt from Joe’s fervent support of the ill-fated Boston Red Sox something about the World Series baseball championship. A young father myself at the time, I also learnt from Joe and Kathleen a lot about parenting – marvelling at the affectionate way in which they were able to relate both to their very young son Matthew and to their teenage son Mark, whose bedroom walls they had cheerfully allowed him to turn into a frenetic action painting.

Joe’s academic career was remarkable not only for his own work as a scholar of Gauriya Vaishnavism but for all that he encouraged and facilitated in others. As well as his primary appointment as Professor in the Study of Religion at St Michael’s College in the University of Toronto, his CV included an astonishing number of Visiting Fellowships (Oxford, Dhaka, Visva-Bharati), journal editorships, conferences organised, books edited and committees chaired. He also found time for selfless voluntary work – for the South Asian communities of Toronto, and an inter-faith ‘Out-of-the-cold’ programme for the homeless in local parishes. He was modest – perhaps too modest – about his scholarship, never publishing his thesis on the ‘Social Implications of the Gauriya Vaishnava Movement’, and contenting himself with articles in journals and chapters in books, rather than full-length books of his own. But in everything he wrote, he had something significant to say. Our mutual friend, Professor Clinton B. Seely has emphasised in an email how ‘Joe and Edward C. Dimock Jr., both educated at Harvard, were deeply committed to the same general subject matter, Bengali medieval Vaishnavism, introduced to them by Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Sr., Professor of Sanskrit.’ In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, they were the inspiration of the annual North American Bengal Studies Conference, at which ‘we could always count on a paper by one or both of these two scholars, Joe and Ed Dimock, often on some heretofore unexplored aspect of Vaishnavism. But both these scholars also ranged far and wide in their intellectual curiosity, touching on Tagore and Jibanananda, to name just two interests of theirs, and considerable more, including the medieval Mangal Kavya genre.’

I suspect that a posthumous collected volume of Joe’s articles would confirm to posterity his importance as a scholar – an importance that would be readily acknowledged by researchers who have used and cited his unpublished PhD thesis. Though technically retired in 2000 from his teaching post, his output as a scholar and his energy and commitment as a teacher showed no signs of abating. How many other retired Professors would commit themselves as he did, with his annual visits to the University of Dhaka, where he taught voluntarily and was instrumental in the establishment of a Department of World Religions and Culture? His achievements in Dhaka, living on the campus in often trying political and environmental conditions, will surely be acknowledged by colleagues and students who worked closely with him.

For an immediate sense of what he contributed there, have a look at the special issue on Religion and Society in Bengal he edited of the Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology ([www.bangladeshsociology.org](http://www.bangladeshsociology.org)), Volume 8, No. 1, January 2011. In that issue, his ‘Introduction to Religious Studies in South Asia: The Dhaka Initiative’ and his article, ‘Chaitanya Vaishnava Devotion (*bhakti*) and Ethics as Socially Integrative in Sultanate Bengal’ indicate even in their abstracts how closely his scholarship, teaching and idealism were integrated. His introductory essay ‘addresses the striking disparity between the obvious prominence of religious aspects in human life, individual and collective, in South Asian countries and the virtual exclusion of comparative academic study of religion (i.e.,world religions) from most South Asian universities.’ That disparity was his main reason for taking up his difficult and demanding post-retirement work in Dhaka, together with his strong feeling that Bengal’s synchronistic religious traditions, and in particular ‘the gentle (*madhurya*) humane kind of devotion or *bhakti* characteristicof Chaitanya and his followers’, convey lessons in religious harmony from which all of us, worldwide, can learn.

If Joe had not been the great teacher, scholar and academic leader that he became, I can imagine that he could have been a politician – or rather, that rarest of breeds, a politician without a trace of power-hunger or cynicism. Boston-born, he remained, throughout his many years of residence in Canada, passionately committed to the liberal and egalitarian traditions of his native Massachusetts. During American presidential elections, he would go back to the USA to campaign for the Democratic Party. In a letter to me dated 10 December 1987, I find him responding to an invitation from me and my wife to him and Kathleen with these characteristic words: ‘The offer of an apartment in Britain for three weeks is exciting and tempting. The one thing that keeps the opportunistic side of me from closing an agreement right away is the real possibility that I may use whatever “free” time I can steal from professional work next summer for writing, speaking, organizing on behalf of some relatively liberal candidates in the forthcoming 1988 federal elections in my imperial homeland.’ In the same letter he mentions the big conference on Sikhism he organised in February 1987, and the arduous task of collecting and editing the papers from that conference for a published volume. In my phone conversation with Kathleen, she mentioned this conference as an example of the way Joe’s academic activities were always linked to his political and moral preoccupations. The Sikh conference emanated from concerns about Sikh separatism and the Khalistan movement, supported by some Sikhs in Canada. His work in Dhaka in recent years had a similarly pressing background: George Bush’s ‘War on Terror’ (which he abominated), and the false condemnation of Islam as a religion of intolerance, a notion that his knowledge of the Islamic traditions of Bengal, and his deep empathy for contemporary Bangladeshi society at its best, had taught him to regard as absurd.

I last saw Joe and Kathleen at a seminar on Tagore organised by Dr Sujit Basu and held at Jorasanko Thakurbari in Calcutta on 10-11 February 2012. I was speaking first in the programme, and had to leave before hearing them. I now have Joe’s paper, ‘Some highlights and sidelights of Rabindranath Tagore’s reception in the West’, sent to me by Kathleen. It is a wise and graceful survey of scholarship on Tagore’s reception in the West, paying tribute not only to Alex Aronson (whose seminal book on the subject tends to be overlooked), but to present-day scholars both senior (Victors Ivbulis, Martin Kämpchen) and younger (Ana Jelnikar, Imre Bangha, Giuseppe Flora and more). To read it brings back vivid memories of Joe on other occasions when I heard him speak – his sonorous voice, his humane and humorous platform manner. I remember especially his eloquent paper for the Tagore Centre UK’s conference in May 2011, on Vaishnava influences on Tagore. Tagore was not Joe’s research field, yet his ability to give an overview, to draw together the numerous threads that have run through the 150th anniversary celebrations, will be poignantly missed.

When I saw Joe at Jorasanko, I thought that he looked a bit tired, and I worried about the strain that he was putting on his health by his continuing visits to Dhaka. But Joe was never going to be a man to stop working, right up to the limits of his life and strength. When the news came in an email from Kathleen of his massive brain haemorrhage on 4 May in New York, and his passing on 6 May, surrounded by his loving family, in Lenox Hill Hospital, Manhattan, my first thought was: if this had to happen, thank heavens that it did while he was with Kathleen and his children and grandchildren, and not far away from home.

People like Joe, who could orchestrate a class or lecture or conference with such grace and finesse, also have a mysterious ability to orchestrate their lives right up to their very last moments. Joe and Kathleen were in New York looking after their grandchildren, Charles and Caroline Schell, while their daughter Deirdre and her husband Christopher were away in Miami. Joe adored his grandchildren, and they adored him: he had put them to bed with his inimitable stories, and had then stayed indoors rather than going out for his usual evening walk because he felt slightly unwell. The haemorrhage and unconsciousness came soon after that, but not before he was able to tell Kathleen that he loved her. What better end can one imagine than that, to a life lived nobly, and dedicated always to trying to make the world a better place? Goodbye dear Joe, friend to your wife and family, friend to your students, friend to scholarship, friend to Bangladesh and India, friend to Bengali religion, culture, literature and language, friend to the Bengali, Sikh and Jain communities of Toronto, and friend to me. We shan’t forget you.

*(With thanks to Kathleen O’Connell, Clinton B. Seely, Martin Kämpchen and Uma Dasgupta for their help with this article.)*

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