

# Nigel Dennis (1949–2013)

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Nigel Dennis, Professor of Spanish at St Andrews, died at home surrounded by his wife Gitta and their twin sons Michael and Christopher on 16 April after a short illness. Nigel was born on 13 October 1949 in North West London and gained a scholarship to Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School. From there he went to Cambridge in 1968 to read Spanish and French at St Catherine's College, gaining a Joint First Class degree in 1971, followed a year later by a PGCE at the Faculty of Education. He stayed in Cambridge for doctoral study and was awarded the PhD for a thesis on the multifaceted Spanish literary figure of José Bergamín (1895–1983) in 1976. That same year he moved to Canada with his new wife to start a twenty-year career at the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Ottawa University, where he became a full professor in Spanish in 1988. For most of his time there he engaged in editorial work with the *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, becoming its 'Director' from 1991–96; he was also 'Co-Director' of the Ottawa Hispanic Studies Series as well as Vice-President and then President (1990–92) of the Canadian Association of Hispanists. His work in university administration included being Secretary, Vice Dean and Acting Dean of the Faculty of Arts.

Nigel came to St Andrews in 1996 and remained there, engaging fully in teaching, research and administration, including periods as Acting Head of Department and of School, RAE coordinator and Director of Research. He played a key role in the promotion of postgraduate studies in the Department and supervised several doctoral students to completion. He was an active external examiner at both undergraduate and doctoral level throughout the UK and Ireland, and a member of the 2008 RAE panel.

Three years ago the School of Modern Languages in St Andrews decided to put on a poster display of the research carried out by staff. We all created our own posters, and what Nigel chose to include in his provides a concise summary of his research interests. He selected as his title "The "Silver Age" of Spanish

Literature: 1900–1939’ and then identified four major subsections. The first was ‘Poets and prose writers: rethinking the canon’; under it he placed the covers of five of his books: the two early monographs on José Bergamín—*El aposento en el aire. Introducción a la poesía de José Bergamín* (Valencia: Pre-Textos 1983) and *José Bergamín. A Critical Introduction 1920–1936* (Toronto: Toronto U. P., 1986); one short book on the vicissitudes of a draft of a Lorca poem, *Vida y milagros de un manuscrito de Lorca: en pos de ‘Poeta en Nueva York’* (Santander: Sociedad Menéndez Pelayo, 2000); and two voluminous anthologies edited and introduced by him: José Bergamín, *Obra esencial* (Madrid: Turner, 2005) and José Díaz Fernández, *Prosas* (Madrid, Fundación Santander Central Hispano, 2006). His second section’s title was ‘The avant-garde, intermediality: how does the language of one medium influence another?’, and was illustrated by the covers of three of his edited volumes: a collection of essays he edited on *Studies on Ramón Gómez de la Serna* (Ottawa Hispanic Texts, 1988); the edition of a book of Gómez de la Serna’s articles about the French capital, *París* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1986); and a collection of interviews with the artist and writer, and Bergamín’s contemporary, Ramón Gaya, titled *De viva voz. Entrevistas 1977–1998* (also Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2007). The next section carried the label ‘Writers and politics: how do politics affect literature?’ and was illustrated by more of Nigel’s titles. These included: *‘Diablo mundo’: los intelectuales y la República. Antología* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1983), on the Republican weekly. Then there was the double anthology of Civil War plays, representing each side of the conflict and recovering long-forgotten works, co-edited in two volumes with Emilio Peral Vega: *Teatro de la guerra civil: el bando republicano* and *El bando nacional* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 2009 & 2010). Another work gathered together Nigel’s own texts on the artist (and personal friend), *Ramón Gaya: el taller de la soledad* (Murcia: Museo Ramón Gaya, 2010). Finally, three examples of his publications were provided dealing with a genre recurrently explored in Nigel’s CV—namely his editions of the correspondence between Bergamín and other writers and, in one case, a musician, all of whom were major figures of the period. These were: *El epistolario Jose Bergamín–Miguel de Unamuno 1923–1935* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1993); *El epistolario José Bergamín–Manuel de Falla 1924–1935* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1995); and *José Bergamín, dolor y claridad de España: Cartas a María Zambrano* (Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2004). The final subsection on the poster was headed ‘The culture of celebrity: what is the

relationship between literature and (self-) publicity?'. This subsection related to a particular aspect of Nigel's work on Ramón Gomez de la Serna, which he was preparing at the time, and which was to materialize in the form of articles and one of his last books, *Greguerías onduladas* (Sevilla: Renacimiento, 2012), on Ramón's radio aphorisms.

The poster illustrates Nigel Dennis' prolific output, his focus and his range. More recently he had edited, with Isabel Verdejo, *Gaya's Complete Works* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2010) and had completed the first volume of a new edition of the works of Gómez de la Serna (Madrid: Biblioteca Castro, 2011). He was also preparing the second volume of Bergamín's complete poetry for Pre-Textos (volume 1 had come out in 2008), as well as new editions of Bergamín's correspondence with Pedro Salinas and with Rafael Alberti. A new departure for Nigel had been his edition of the correspondence between J. B. Trend, first professor of Spanish at Cambridge, and Manuel de Falla (Granada: Fundación Archivo Manuel de Falla/Univ. de Granada, 2007). Nigel's edition represented an early stage in the reevaluation of this pioneering English scholar and friend of Spain, which has gathered momentum since, with a new book on Trend appearing in 2013 and two symposia taking place, one in Cambridge and another in Madrid's Residencia de Estudiantes.

There is little doubt, then, about the scope and import of Nigel's contribution to his field of research, or about the esteem in which he was held by Spain's intellectuals and publishers. In the past few years there came constant requests from Spain for keynote addresses, prologues and editions of the work of his preferred writers; some of the more recent of these commitments had to be cancelled because of his illness. Nigel's legacy will remain closely associated with the literature of the Generation of 27 and the Spanish Civil War and in particular with its prose writers. His work has illuminated not only recognized authors such as Lorca, Alberti and Gómez de la Serna, but also some lesser-known ones, like José Díaz Fernández, Ernesto Giménez Caballero and Ramón Gaya, whom Nigel helped to reassess. Latterly Nigel also did research on Spanish exile literature, especially from Mexico, where he had contacts and many friends; but he worked too on the Misiones Pedagógicas of the Second Republic; and on the Basque children who were evacuated to Britain during the Spanish Civil War.

The figure that acted as the thread linking all his interests, however, and with whom the work of Nigel Dennis will remain forever tied is undoubtedly José Bergamín, a ‘cangrejo cocido’ (‘porque no hay por dónde cogerlo’), to use an image Nigel appropriated from the author himself. Nigel began his work on Bergamín with the two complementary early monographs that drew and expanded on his doctoral thesis. The first, *El aposento en el aire*, focused on poetry, a genre in which Bergamín only started publishing in exile; the second was Nigel’s major contribution to the subject. *José Bergamín. A Critical Introduction 1920–1936* is the first detailed and wide-ranging study of the man and the various dimensions of his work up to the Civil War (as aphorist, critic, stylist, dramatist and editor of *Cruz y Raya*). This pioneering monograph won the triennial prize of the Canadian Association of Hispanists and was deemed in a review by Alan Hoyle to be an excellent first book on an elusive, ghostly subject: ‘The final paradox is that through this painstaking, loving, yet lucid reconstruction of his personality [...], Bergamín, the enemy of academia, will achieve the academic recognition his works alone cannot justify. His shade, as well as students of the period, will be eternally grateful’ (*MLR*, July 1989).

Throughout his years in St Andrews I read many of Nigel’s articles, prologues and lectures on Bergamín in Spanish, as even though his language (spoken as well as written) was faultless, he wanted to have it checked by a native speaker. Doing this I learnt much about Bergamín and was always surprised to discover yet another connection between him and the main intellectual figures of his time, not only in Spain but also in Latin America and France, whom he met during his long years of exile. I recently found out a new link which sadly I was not able to discuss with Nigel, namely that Bergamín was an inspiration to the current president of Uruguay, José ‘Pepe’ Mujica, who as a young man attended the Spaniard’s public lectures at the Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias in Montevideo. It seems clear to me that Bergamín developed close personal links with his peers wherever he went and that he was almost universally respected in the various cultural circles in which he moved. He acted as the great intellectual facilitator amongst his generation as well as a generous mentor to the young creative minds he came across. Nigel, one of his mentees, in his *don de gentes* and in the esteem he inspired in students and staff, was a modern-day Bergamín. My evidence is the stream of messages received

from colleagues, students and institutions from around the Hispanic world on hearing of his passing, expressing their dismay, sadness and fond memories.

As a teacher Nigel was rated extremely highly by his students, not only in questionnaires but also more spontaneously when during the Semester *Cenas* of the Department he treated the audience to the 'St Andrews 2.1 Student Blues' on his electric guitar. For his collegial qualities, his personal and intellectual kindness, his wit and good humour, as well as for his fine scholarship and general commitment to Hispanism, he will be sorely missed.