

ACLALS @ BUCKINGHAM PALACE

A cynical scholar's report on the celebration of the Commonwealth's diamond anniversary

When I became the "webmistress" of the ACLALS site and the treasurer of the European branch of the association (EACLALS) in 2008, I did not know that, about one year later, I would be googling the words "Queen of England curtsy" to find out exactly how one is supposed to greet the English monarch. But neither had I anticipated that, a few days prior to the said internet search, I would be asked to represent ACLALS at a reception given by Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace.

Indeed, ACLALS – which was officially accredited to the Commonwealth in 2005 – had been invited to the Palace to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the modern Commonwealth. The invitation sent to our chair, Geoffrey Davis, nevertheless came with the specific request that the association nominate a representative "under 40, and ideally under 30" to at-

tend the event. The presence of young delegates, the letter suggested, would contribute to "emphasising the forward-looking aspect of the 2009 Commonwealth theme ('the Commonwealth@60: serving a new generation')." Ironically, the strict age limit ruled out the three members of the ACLALS board – Geoffrey Davis, Marc Delrez and Bénédicte Ledent – all of whom had dedicated their careers to the development of Commonwealth literary studies, and had thereby played a far more important role in "serving a new generation" of writers and scholars than I ever had.

I accepted the committee's nomination with a mixture of pride and excitement, yet I could not help but interrogate the symbolic meaning behind the visit I was about to make. Could my status as would-be critic of postcolonial literature be reconciled with my participation in what promised to be an unambiguous celebration of the Commonwealth – an institution that, in my prejudiced mind, I had always assumed to have emerged from the dusty re-

mains of the British Empire? Was my taking part in a ceremony hosted by the Queen of England compatible with a critical approach to the monarchy? With a twinge of guilt, I remembered those who had boldly declined invitations to Buckingham Palace – the example of British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips after winning the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2005 came to mind. Predictably, however, curiosity got the better of me, and I consoled myself with the thought that, even if Phillips had indeed refused to meet the Queen, he had not turned down the literary award itself, which was still officially endorsed by the Commonwealth. Moreover, I reminded myself that, also in 2005, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie had accepted the same distinction in the "best first book" category despite an avowed ambivalence towards the concept of a "commonwealth," whose "suggestion of parity" she perceived as theoretical rather than grounded in fact.

And so on 28 April 2009 in the late afternoon, I made my way to Buckingham Palace via St James's

Park. Upon arrival, I rapidly noticed that the guests, whom I estimated at about three hundred, consisted of, on the one hand, representatives of Commonwealth nations mainly employed by (or recruited via) their countries' respective embassies and, on the other, people involved in Commonwealth-related associations active in fields as diverse as medicine and human rights.

The guests were welcomed into the Queen's Picture Gallery, a long hall home to a number of magnificent paintings by Van Dyck, Rubens and Rembrandt, among many others. For the occasion, the canvases displayed on the walls had been supplemented by a small exhibition that included presents given to the Queen during her various visits to Commonwealth countries. The atmosphere of grandeur was completed by an impeccable staff offering guests refreshments and elaborate appetisers.

Having scanned the hall in search of potential acquaintances (there were none), I was hovering by a bowl of exotic-looking crisps that decidedly resembled *pot-pourri* when I was approached by a middle-aged member of staff, who had visibly been instructed to entertain isolated guests. He enquired as to my occupation, and I diplomatically answered that I was studying "Commonwealth literature." Then, with a wink, he replied, "I guess you'd be approaching that from a critical – like, *postcolonial* – perspective?" I was baffled. Weren't people working at Buckingham Palace supposed to be reactionary, stiff-upper-lip Englishmen? The employee turned out to know most of the African novelists I admired, and we had a stimulating conversation about the need for first-generation postcolonial authors to "write back to the Empire."

After the opening reception, the guests were asked to wait in line

to be introduced to the Queen in the next room. When my turn arrived and my name was announced, I shook the monarch's gloved hand. Having garnered contradictory information about the need to curtsy or not, I settled for a clumsy half-bow which, I decided, could be interpreted both ways. I was then shown to the Ballroom, where the assembly was treated to the world premiere of Paul Carroll's "Cantata for the Commonwealth," a musical piece comprising five movements for vocals and orchestra, and which was interpreted by the ensemble of the Academy of St Martin in the Fields. The sumptuous decor of the Ballroom did not fully distract me from the lyrics of the cantata, which were included in the programme (and in the booklet of the CD later distributed to the guests):

*We've faced our darkest hours
And we've crossed some
stormy seas
In our journey to progress
On life's momentous course
[...]
The Commonwealth is harmony
Find peace and happiness
And harmony in freedom
One people one world
Harmony and peace for evermore*

So much for the postcolonial approach, I thought. Had the "stormy seas" of the colonial period not been agitated by Britain itself? And could the modern Commonwealth, for all its insistence on the equality of its members, truly be considered the epitome of "harmony" without at least calling into question its internal power structures? With this thought in mind, I left for the Music Room, where the closing reception was to be held.

My scepticism was somewhat dispelled when I entered in conversation with some of the guests. I exchanged a few words with a

young Trinidadian man involved in a Commonwealth-funded project designed to encourage education in the Caribbean, and talked at length with an English veterinarian who told me that the aim of her association was to provide African cattle farmers with scientific assistance. Her organisation's activities were, she insisted, greatly facilitated by existing Commonwealth structures. It occurred to me that, a little closer to my disciplinary home, the Commonwealth had also for several years supported the activities of ACLALS, which, since its creation, had been constantly engaged in the critical evaluation of the human and cultural disaster that had been colonialism, and in the appraisal of its contemporary legacy. In other words, the Commonwealth, through its Foundation, had been funding an association resolutely dedicated to analysing literary works that mostly denounced the shortcomings of the former British Empire, out of which the Commonwealth itself had been born, if only indirectly.

Of course, in my reflection I was not so naïve as to believe that all this generosity stemmed solely from a purely humanitarian impulse. I have still not lost my cynical edge: I shall not be caught singing the "Cantata for the Commonwealth" just yet. Nevertheless, I readily concede that, even though the Commonwealth may not quite be the embodiment of "harmony in freedom" that it aspires to be, its efforts enable us, ACLALS members, to try and actively work towards some of its – and our – ideals.

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