

Under the Canopy and other poems

This collection was the first ever English-language compilation of poems in *Negara Brunei Darussalam* and came out back in late 1998; although Bruneian poems written in English is perhaps a more appropriate designation here.

I was the editor – along with a fellow Anzac, Dr Alan Chamberlain, who was then teaching at *Universiti Brunei Darussalam*. I was employed to teach English language primarily – at secondary school level – by the British conglomerate Centre for British Teachers, who – along with HSBC and The British Council – sponsored this collection. I had already been living in Brunei Darussalam for four years.

Why did we seek to compile English-language poetry as written by Bruneians? Because I had seen that many of my students liked to write poetry, were in fact genuinely interested in so doing. More specifically, of course there is a very long and strong tradition of writing poetry – especially *sajak* and *ghazal* and *pantun* - in *Bahasa Melayu* in Brunei Darussalam (as witness the epic *Syair Awang Simawn*) but here I was teaching English as a second or in some cases a third language and finding some excellent English language poetry as written by non first language speakers of that tongue. More significantly, they were informing and infusing their poems with themes and imagery from their homeland, so as to make for a distinctive Bruneian poetry in English.

I therefore felt the need to collate what I was seeing and reading – often also as published in the *Borneo Bulletin* once a week – and thus began chasing up locally-based poets. Alan Chamberlain was also researching the best ways to teach literature – especially poetry - in Bruneian classrooms, and he had encountered other such examples of what I was seeing, so he became a natural ally for this project.

Of course such English language poetry developed much later than the dominant *Bahasa Melayu* opus and it is also worthwhile noting that several poets writing in *Melayu* later deliberately translated their poems into English so as to be able to achieve a wider conspicuousness. “During the same period [early 1970s] prominent Bruneian Malay poets devised a strategy to sell their work regionally by

translating their poetry into English," noted one such poet, Irwan Haji Abdul Rahman, in 1998.

I was also tied – synchronistically – to this selfsame Irwan Hj. Abdul Rahman, who was the first Bruneian poet to be published in English - in the *Borneo Bulletin* in January, 1992. We taught at the same school where I was also Head of the English Department and where I soon learned of Irwan's interest and ability in creating English-language poetry – some of which, of course, found its way between the covers of this collection, for which he also penned an introductory piece entitled *History of English Language Poetry in Brunei Darussalam*.

Synchronistically also, James Norcliffe – a leading international poet (recently a semi-finalist in the 2012 Proverse Prize for Literature, an invited artist at the Medellin Literary Festival in 2012, an invitee to the Iowa Writers Exchange Programme, a former Robert Burns Fellow as well as being extremely well represented in many leading international poetry publications) was teaching at the selfsame school – it was he whose position as Head of Department I took over! It all seemed as if fate had meant for *Under the Canopy* to be produced back then.

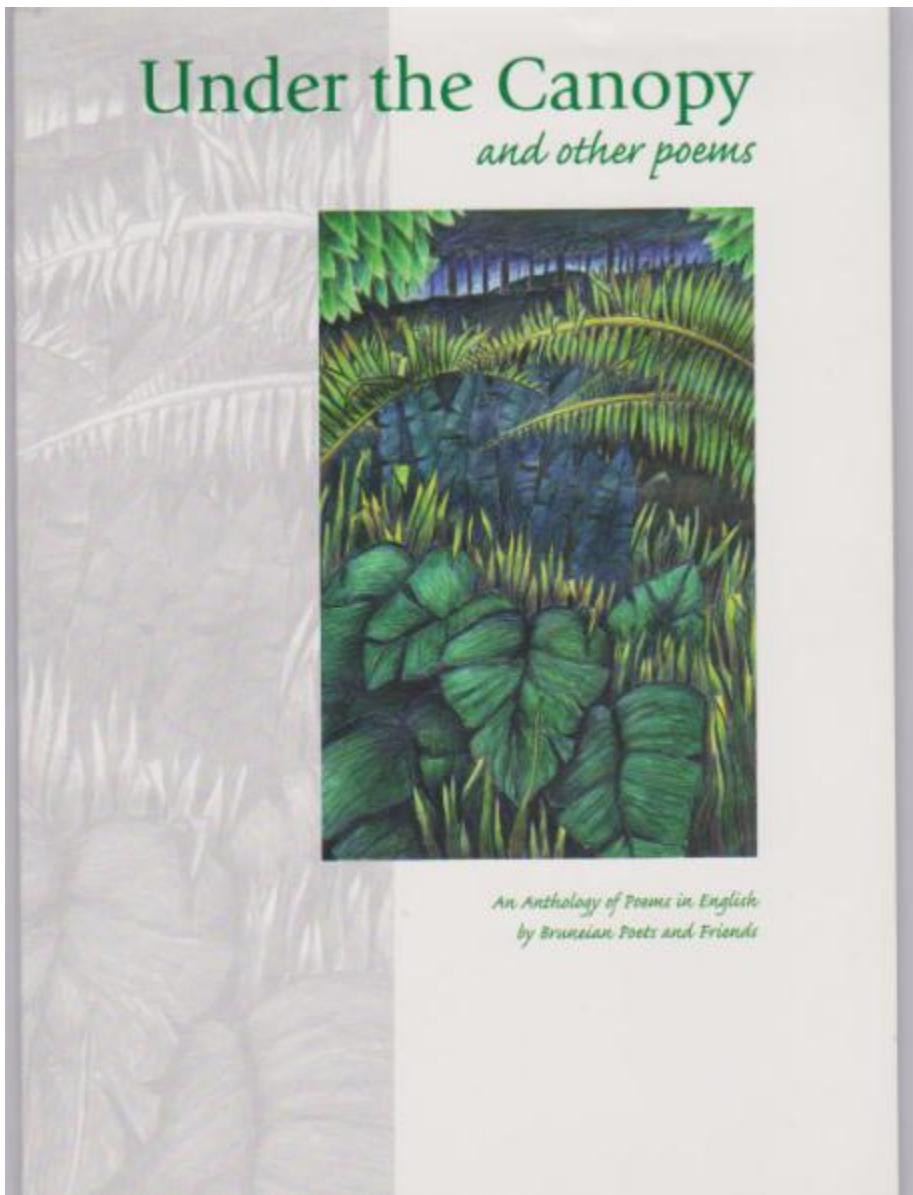
Thus the anthology came to be, as Alan and I sourced and scoured and advertised for poems throughout the country – and they rolled in from far and wide – from Temburong to Kuala Belait. Not just from locals either – for we had contacted Malaysia's own internationally known National Laureate, Muhammad Haji Salleh and he was included. Goh Poh Seng and Ghulan Sarwar Yousof from Singapore also consented to be represented in the book, while another Singaporean who often came over to Brunei Darussalam – Anna Wang – also submitted her poetry.

More, there were some other expatriates then resident in Brunei, one such being Arif Khudairi, who were also all keen to submit. Arif Khudairi – of course – remains in Bandar Seri Begawan and is another with an international reputation: he too was recently invited to read at Medellin, Colombia (2010.) Among his many other accolades are his 2011 anthology entitled *Love Poems of Arif Khudairi*, which was published in Canada and nominated for the Griffin Poetry Award, and his being invited this year to go to Osaka, Japan to present a paper on haiku: the invitation coming from INFOA, Japan in response to another of his anthologies – *Divine*

Lake.

However it was the local poets who really rammed home the fact that the country had not only skilled writers of poetry in *Bahasa Melayu*, but also in the English language. Other than the talented Irwan, there were Isa Shaminan, 'Keris Warisan' aka Mohammad Haji Hassan, Peng Eng Lee, Abdul Ghanai Haji Daud, 'Lone Wolf' aka Haji Maswady Haji Amjah – and a myriad of younger poets. In fact, such were the quality and quantity of submissions, we had trouble in deciding which poems and poets to leave out!

The collection was further consolidated by a set of excellent art pieces also drawn up by local artists, as well as by our teaching guide to the anthology – both of which, the collection and the teaching guide to the poems – are, by the way, still being utilized in Brunei Darussalam to this day. *Under the Canopy and other poems* is a very handsome tome, which has more than stood the test of time.



Our accompanying resource guide for this collection established a pattern of approaching the appraisal, evaluation and enjoyment of English language poetry from a language base up, whereby before any attempt was made to comprehend, evaluate and appreciate any poem, the vocabulary was explained and the distinctive formal structures of a poem (if any) were identified and clarified first. Alan and I established a six-stage sequential approach to each and every poem: Warm-Up; Vocabulary; First Reading; Form, Language and Structure; Understanding and Evaluation; Follow-Up.

This holistic approach we later followed in our *Teach English Through Poetry*

series in Aotearoa-New Zealand, Australia, U.K (User Friendly Resources, 2006-2009) and then the *Developing Skills: Poetry and Song* (Aristo Educational Press, 2012) resource in Hong Kong. But this approach all began in Brunei!

You may well be asking however, 'What of the present situation in Brunei Darussalam as regards such English language poetry?' Hannah Ho, a lecturer at the University of Brunei Darussalam's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences confirms the contemporary scene as being similar to the 1990s in terms of sporadic and scattered individuals creating English language poetry, often in some isolation. She noted, "As far as I know, there isn't a bustling or thriving English poetry scene in Brunei" (2013), while her colleague, Dr Kathrina bte DP Haji Mohd Daud concurs: "There are a lot of poets in Brunei who write (and publish) in English, but who tend to work in isolation, and who don't, as far as I know, have a platform for showcasing their work on a national level" (2013.) One such example would be the 2009 collection by Nurul Izzati Haji Mohammed Jamil entitled *Young Dreams*, distributed almost solely within the borders of the country as a small print run. There was in the same year an anthology edited by Arif Khudairi titled *Insperasi*, which, true to the polyglottal ambience of the country, incorporated Arabic, Malay and English poems. A more recent further example here is John Onu Odihi's 2012 *Tribute to Brunei and Other Poems* – he being an expatriate Nigerian academic, long resident in the country.

So there is not a considerable change overall, then, in relation to any organized systemization of Bruneian poetry being written in the English language.

Yet of course, excellent poetry in English is still being written by Bruneian residents, and it is still being published in the pages of *The Borneo Bulletin*. There have also been more and more endeavours to kick-start other English language poetry threads. Take for example this recent *Brunei Times* headline from 8 September, 2012:

MSPSBS students get creative at slam poetry workshop

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN: A 'Slam Poetry' workshop for students of the English Language and English Literature course continued at Maktab Sains Paduka Seri Begawan Sultan (MSPSBS), Borneo Bulletin reported. Richard 'Dreadlock Alien' Grant

was at hand to teach the participants about slam poetry – a form of poetry, which is upbeat and exciting while at the same time, creative and stimulating.

There is also considerable support for the writing of poetry per se, from the Ministry of Education, and there are several poetry-writing and recitation contests now happening there – such as at Paduka Seri Begawan Sultan Science College - given that much of the focus is on poetry written in Bahasa Melayu: “There have been increasing translations of Malay poems into English as well through Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka,” (Kathrina Daud, 2013.)

This initial language of gestation being Malay is all rather appropriate too, especially when we consider the recent words of Haji Mohammad Salleh in his Afterword to *English Language as Hydra* (2012) – another book I co-edited, with its prime focus on the debilitating effects of imposed English language on Indigenous cultures and tongue. In a section entitled a *Poet Chooses his Language* he notes: “After a long period suffering from the guilt of choosing some other people’s tongue, I made a conscious effort to write my poetry – the genre closest to my heart and my own medium of expression – in the Malaysian national language.”

I am, of course, fully aware of the huge irony of myself increasingly also turning away from English language poetry toward poetry written in an Indigenous tongue or in a form of deliberately usurped English, but I also firmly believe that there is still plenty of room for poets of any given country to write in whichever tongue suits them at the time, particularly if they strive to own their own version of the imposed lingo, if you will. Poets in Brunei Darussalam are also of course no different, and there remains a solid place for them to create distinctive poetry in their version of the English language. Especially there – a point so well articulated by the widespread depiction and description of the country as conducive to relaxed poetry writing per se: it is after all the Abode of Peace!

All the more reason to check out the poem *The Abode of Peace* as incorporated in *Under the Canopy and other poems* and written by Arif Khudairi, who – among many others – continues writing fine Bruneian poetry in English and, in his case especially, reading poems in schools throughout Brunei.

Long may they all prosper.

The Abode of Peace

At dawn
walking alone
in the street
as Bandar
Seri Begawan
was asleep
when a call
for prayer
like a green
green bird
flew up
from the slim
snow-like
lofty minaret
of *masjid*
Omar Ali
Saifuddin
and the air
was filled
so rapidly
with a scent
of *taqwa*
and a sense
of peace

Arif Khudairi
Bandar Seri Begawan
November 5, 1997