

— Introduction

The Sedgewick Lectures are named in honour of Garnett G. Sedgewick, who was the founding Head of the Department of English at the University of British Columbia, and the first Lecture was given in 1955 (six years after his death). Over the years many distinguished scholars and writers have given the Sedgewick lecture — among them Harry Levin, Hugh MacLennan, Northrop Frye, Robert Bringhurst, Anne McClintock, and last year Jonathan Goldberg.

This year's Sedgewick Lecturer is Dr. William H. New, UBC University Killam Professor and one of the University's and Canada's most distinguished scholars. It is a very special privilege and honour to introduce Dr. New — whom we know more familiarly as "Bill" — because he is one of our own and because it is only on rare occasions that this prestigious lecture is given by a member of our own Department. Bill New, who joined UBC in 1965, is a specialist in the areas of Canadian and Commonwealth (more commonly known today as Postcolonial) literatures; indeed, over his long and distinguished career he has been a shaping force in both fields. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and has won many awards and prizes including the Jacob Biely Prize and

the UBC Killam prizes for research and for teaching. From 1995-97 he held the Brenda and David McLean Chair in Canadian Studies at UBC.

From 1977 to 1995 he served as Editor of the scholarly journal *Canadian Literature*, which is the leading journal in the field. Under his guiding hand and eye the journal became internationally celebrated and carried innovative research on Canada and Canadian literature around the world. But Bill's contributions to the study of literature extend far beyond this important work. He has published well over three hundred articles, chapters, editorials, and reviews, authored twelve scholarly books, and edited many more. Among these books are foundational works on Canadian literary history — *A History of Canadian Literature* (1989) or *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing* (1997) — and on particular New Zealand, Australian, and Canadian writers — *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand* (1987) or *Reading Mansfield and Metaphors of Form* (1999). His mammoth editorial enterprise — the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* — is forthcoming from the University of Toronto Press later this year, and it signifies the kind of extraordinary knowledge, scope, and scholarly generosity that characterizes the career of this man.

But Bill New can by no means be summed up by his scholarship alone. He is an award-winning teacher, a mentor to generations of graduate students who now teach and conduct their research in universities around the world. He is a generous and thoughtful colleague, an avid gardener, a deft squash player, a wit (whose wry, punning sense of humour is never far from the surface), and a poet. Perhaps it is in this

ABOUT IRONY, MAINLY IN THE COMMONWEALTH

last mentioned capacity — as poet — where we can see his scholarly love for literature blurring with and feeding into his passion for language, rhythm, imagery, and communication. He has already five books of poetry to his credit, with two more forthcoming! As someone recently asked: can there really be only ONE Bill New? The answer, I suspect, may be found in the poem called “Being Only” from his first volume for children, *Vanilla Gorilla*:

I feel like hidden treasure
That is hoarded in a sieve —
It’s really very hard to hide
Where Only Children live —

So if one day I have the chance
To be my opposite,
I’d like to live as triplets
Just to share the load a bit.

The 2002 Sedgewick Lecture is one more indication of Bill New’s talents. *Grandchild of Empire: about irony, mainly in the Commonwealth*, brings together his knowledge of literature, his love of ideas, his passion for language (its double entendres, its marvellous ambiguities, its rich associations), and his ability to perform, something the written version of the lecture can only hint at. In performance, the New triplets addressed us in literary voices from around and about the world.

Sherrill Grace
Professor and Head, Dept. of English, UBC
February 2002

— I. *About Definition*

I would like to begin by thanking my colleagues for inviting me to give the 2002 Sedgewick lecture. It is a privilege and an honour. Garnett Sedgewick was known as a particularly gifted teacher and a fine scholar; and the title of his book, *Of Irony, especially in drama*,¹ provides a kind of tangential start to my talk today, *about irony, mainly in the Commonwealth*. Tangential because what I want to do is partly personal — to take the chance to pay tribute to my own teachers, and to the art of teaching *indirectly*. Partly, too, because this talk is a critical exercise not just in examining inheritance and imitation but also in the art of indirection. *About* irony: the lead preposition in my title hints at a *non*-linear challenge: so I will be non-linear in what I have to say, by intention. *About*: from OE *onbutan*, “on the outside.” I do not want simply to repeat what critics and theorists have said about irony in general,² but to look at what some specific literary examples suggest about the function of subject, strategy, and tone. I want to refer both to some issues in colonial social history and to some techniques of writing in the Commonwealth that are related to them. And I want to talk about some of the ways in which irony functions, not just as a humorous device (which it often

is) or as a way of troping dismissal (which it all too often can be), but as a voice of resistance to authority *and at the same time* as a covert affirmation of some of the intricate ways in which the generations of Empire and Independence relate.

As a literary technique irony is conventionally defined as “saying one thing but meaning another,” a riddling phrase (see Ill. 1) that not only calls to mind what Alice almost said



Ill. 1: Laxman (R.K. Narayan's brother) was one of India's foremost political and social cartoonists. This ironic view of post-independence language policy was collected in Laxman's You Said It #3, published by I.B.H. Publishing Co., Bombay, 1968.

to the March Hare³ (that she says what she means and means what she says) but also sounds as much like justifying a mistaken word choice as a conscious rhetorical strategy. One of the many ironies of irony, perhaps. Yet it is not quite accurate to restrict irony this way, for irony often means saying what you mean at a slant, or saying two things at once — *oversetting*: so that a reader might hear (through the *performance* of a given set of words) not only their split levels of *implication* but also the divergent *relation* between an apparent surface intent and an often political undertow.⁴ “Voice,” writes the poet Lisa Robertson, “is a hybrid of the sonic and the political.”⁵ This blur between *saying* and *meaning* creates a sort of rhetorical diversion, a pause while meaning and function can be figured out; and often the figuring out occurs in an act of recognition (or, as D.J. Enright has it, “reverberation”) — rather than in an act of explanation — which means that irony, to be effective, depends upon context and shared knowledge. So let me set up here a context both personal and social, so that I can then go on to probe the literary politics of Imperial Centre and Commonwealth margin — and vice-versa — and then circle back to the ordinariness (not the exoticism) that irony persistently reads.