

SOAS, University of London

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Honorary Degree: Professor J. M. Coetzee

Citation: Dr Kai Easton

Madame President, *ladies, gentlemen and colleagues*

From 1962-1965, John Maxwell Coetzee lived in England, first in this great metropolis and later out in Surrey. He had just completed his undergraduate honours degrees in English and Mathematics at the University of Cape Town before he set sail for Southampton, his first trip overseas.

He was 21 years old, an aspiring poet, and London, he told himself, was ‘the city from which he must learn to write’. The plan was to get a respectable job by day and write in the free hours. He soon found work as a computer programmer -- a programmer, that is, in the earliest days of computers -- near Oxford Street. In the evenings and on Saturdays, he also researched and wrote an MA thesis on the novels of Ford Madox Ford. He knew this Bloomsbury neighbourhood, and he must have

walked by SOAS many times on his way to what was then Dillons bookstore on Malet & Gower Streets.

He would also have known that he was walking by one of the great publishing houses of the twentieth century, Faber & Faber, a building now integral to the SOAS campus, and adorned with a commemorative plaque in honour of its most famous editorial director, the poet -- and one of his early literary mentors -- T. S. Eliot.

All of this is a prelude to the story of the writer we are honouring today, who began making notes for what became his first novel, *Dusklands*, in the Reading Room of the British Museum, just a stone's throw from here.

It is now fifty years since John Coetzee left this island's shores for further studies in America -- specifically a doctorate at the University of Texas, where as a Fulbright scholar he read linguistics, literature and Germanic languages, and wrote a dissertation on Samuel Beckett's English fiction.

In that time, he has become one of the world's most distinguished novelists and critical thinkers. All of this has happened whilst also teaching and inspiring generations of students and colleagues -- from Cape Town to Chicago -- in his role as a Professor of Literature, a position he currently

holds at the University of Adelaide in South Australia, where he has lived since 2002.

His work has been recognised through numerous other honorary degrees by other eminent universities, and he has accumulated literary prizes, one after the other, and national honours from France and the Netherlands, as well as South Africa's highest award, the Order of Mapungubwe (Gold).

He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003.

Even without his fiction, a corpus which now includes some thirteen novels and for which he has won two Booker Prizes (for *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983 and *Disgrace* in 1999), a Commonwealth Writer's Prize, the Prix Femina Étranger, the Irish Times International Fiction Prize, and many more, Coetzee as a scholar would still be acquiring honorary degrees, since not only are his novels taught on syllabi around the world, but so is his criticism: from the essays collected in *White Writing* on colonial South African literature -- a seminal book that is still unmatched since its publication in 1988 -- to those on censorship in *Giving Offense*, his intellectual autobiography of essays and interviews in *Doubling the Point*, and the two volumes, *Stranger Shores* and *Inner Workings*, which feature many of the essays he has written as a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*.

Even this doesn't adequately provide a sense of the range of his work, the variety and originality, the cross-generic, hybrid and difficult-to-classify works, such as the eight lessons in *Elizabeth Costello*, or the extraordinary polyphonic novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*, or the magnificent memoir trilogy, *Scenes from Provincial Life* -- or the translations from Dutch and Afrikaans, or his collaborative ventures, or the adaptations of his novels for stage and screen.

Twenty years ago, when he was awarded an honorary doctorate at the University of Cape Town, his fellow novelist and colleague André Brink proclaimed that, 'John Coetzee has changed not only the South African literary landscape but the shape and horizons of the novel as a genre'.

The magnetic effect is tangible: 'There are centres named after him', writes David Attwell,

centres of creative writing, centres for creative and performing arts named after him, in places at other ends of the world -- Adelaide, Australia, and Bogotá, Colombia. There is even an asteroid named after Coetzee.

Years ago in the South African press, Coetzee was variously called ‘the Beckett of the Boland’, ‘the Kafka of the Karoo’, ‘the Faulkner of the Veld’. All three accolades are well chosen, since they emphasise key writers in his formation and a landscape that has been central to much of his fiction. One could enumerate others: Defoe, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Cervantes, Flaubert, Pound and Rilke. But if we were to think of artists with a similar approach to *work* and *style*, I would still go elsewhere: two figures -- remote from each other in time and vocation -- for whom he has expressed admiration. In classical music, it is of course J. S. Bach; in tennis, it is of course Roger Federer. Both keep standing the test of time, demonstrating the kind of genius that combines industry, improvisation, intelligence, and intuition, qualities that have made them classic players in their respective fields, and qualities you will find when you read the work of J. M. Coetzee.

Madame President, it is my privilege now to present Professor John Maxwell Coetzee for the award of Doctor of Literature and to invite him to address this assembly.