

Presentation, by B. Forkner (1999)

The Anthony Burgess Centre owes its existence first and foremost to the generosity of Liana Burgess. After several discussions with me and other University officials in Monaco and in Angers, she decided to give to the University Library of the University of Angers an important collection of books, documents, musical scores, and other miscellaneous items belonging to her late husband. Thus far, the University Library has received several shipments of books, one from the country house in the south of France where Burgess wrote *The Pianoplayers*, and the other from Malta where he and Liana lived for a number of years before moving to Italy.

The primary aims of the Anthony Burgess Centre, organized by members of the English Department of the University, are to stock the special collection, to record and catalogue all books and documents it contains, to organize symposiums and publish books about Anthony Burgess's works, and to encourage students and specialists of the Burgess oeuvre to full exploit the Centre's resources. With these aims in mind, we have created the Anthony Burgess website which regularly announces our various projects.

Obviously, the intersection of Anthony Burgess and the University of Angers was not wholly accidental, and requires at least a few lines of personal history. I first met him when I was a young graduate student of literature at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. He had been invited by the University to spend a month on campus as writer-in-residence. Most writers-in-residence gave a few readings, hobnobbed with the students in campus cafés, and made themselves generally available for receptions and formal ceremonies. Burgess was a different case altogether. Invited chiefly because of his reputation as one of the most original and prolific novelists of his generation, he was also recognized as a gifted student of Shakespeare and the other Elizabethan dramatists, and as a distinguished linguist. He turned out also to be a voracious reader of anything in print, ready to debate any of the underground classics with the students, on and off the campus, and at the same time a formidably learned independent scholar. Thus he was in every respect an ideal choice for a major American university in the late sixties.

On a day that is still a living legend in Chapel Hill, Burgess stunned the campus by guest-teaching five different courses, not on general matters of his choice, but on the scheduled

topics of the required syllabus. These courses normally would have been given by five different professors, each one a highly regarded specialist in his field. The topics ranged from an account of Chaucer's scientific knowledge in a passage from *The House of Fame* on up to the problem of Celtic myth in Joyce's

Ulysses

. A number of more arcane mysteries were to be demystified in between. He sang, from memory, a T. S. Eliot poem as if it were a jazz piano piece. He recited passages of Swift's

A Tale of the Tub

(again from memory) to illustrate the pronunciation of eighteenth-century English. After this spectacular performance, Burgess owned the English Department, body and soul, student and faculty together. As a matter of fact, the performance continued unabated in a local drinking establishment well into the early hours of the morning. I was not surprised to learn that he had composed his last work,

Byrne

, a remarkably witty novel in verse, on his deathbed.

When I first came to France, early in the seventies, I continued to keep in touch with Anthony and Liana, though by that time his writing and his career in the cinema kept him extremely busy. He was always ready to accept an invitation, however, and came twice to the University of Nantes where I was teaching to give talks and readings. When I moved to Angers in 1981, I invited him once again to give a talk, this time to help me with the founding of our *Journal of the Short Story*

He delivered his talk, a masterpiece of concentrated improvisation, at our first colloquium, in 1983, thus providing the first personal link with Angers and its University.

I know he would have been extremely pleased with Liana's decision to make Angers and the Centre the beneficiaries of her magnificent gift. Burgess spent the last years of his life in France, and, like Ford Madox Ford, found in French vitalism a source of hope for humanity. He could become irritated with the postmodern ideologues and midnight theorists who throng the academies, here as elsewhere, but his love of the genuine French spirit always overcame the occasional irritations.

It is good to know that the creation of the Centre corresponds to a fresh revival of interest in the Burgess phenomenon. His novels and essays are being reprinted, his music performed and recorded, and he is increasingly being remembered by his peers as one of the last great critics and independent "man of letters" in the rich English tradition. Harold Bloom, who had already singled out *Nothing Like the Sun* for special praise in *The Western Canon*, praises Burgess again (this time for his "critical wisdom") in the recent

Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human
(pp.291-292).

Already the Centre has been recognized by the national and international press. In February 1999 the BBC sent a team of five journalists and cameramen to Angers in order to feature the Centre in a two-hour documentary on Burgess. The BBC filmed the Centre's special collection and interviewed Liana Burgess. The BBC also filmed a concert of Burgess' piano music performed by Maureen Turquet, one of the founding members of the Centre. The documentary included interviews with A.S. Byatt, Gore Vidal, William Boyd, Jean-Jacques Annaud, Malcolm MacDowell, and others. It has been shown in England at least twice and has been widely praised in the British press.

[Ben Forkner](#) , Founder
Anthony Burgess Centre