



Commonwealth Institute

COMMON...PLACES? An Internet Poetry Residency

JEREMY CRONIN



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Jeremy Cronin: biography

A poet and political activist, Jeremy Cronin was born in Durban in 1949, grew up in the Western Cape, and studied philosophy at the University of Cape Town and the Sorbonne.

He lectured in philosophy at Cape Town until, victim of the Terrorism Act, he was arrested for carrying out underground work for the then banned African National Congress in 1976. He spent time in a maximum security prison with death row inmates and was released after seven years in 1983.

In the same year, his first collection, *Inside*, whose poems were illegally recorded in prison, was published to great success. Translated into many languages and winner of the 1984 Ingrid Jonker Prize, *Inside* addresses the relationship between public and private, political struggle on the one hand and the need for expressing more private and personal feelings on the other.

After his release, he spent three years in exile in London and Lusaka and returned to South Africa in 1990. His poems have appeared in many magazines and anthologies and his latest collection, *Even the*



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Symposium on the Mount

You coming with? one asks,

Above the bleached out line of gold-mine dumps, not
Quite level with Ponte Tower's Coca-Cola sign,
We share the ridge, up here, of Bez Valley koppie
With the rastas in their pirated Nike look-alike trainers,
Smoking ganja in persistent disdain of Babylon, besides the monument
To the Indian dead of the Anglo-Boer war – go figure.

Here, late afternoon, we loiter in the backyard of empires
That telescope into each other, the once risen,
The long fallen, the actually ascendant,
Which makes, of this, a place to put my question:

What is commonwealth? I ask Thenjiwe.
Remnants from the last empire but one, she replies.
A shadow cast across pretension.

Hmm, Langa half agrees,
But especially the left-over of language, this one,
A global currency on the tip of my tongue.

Uh-uh, Gemma interjects,
You're too upbeat, it's the era of disempowerment by in-
As much as exclusion, one size fits all meanings,
Every time we open our mouths in English,
Out pours the Washington consensus...

Ungenerous, Hein objects,
I mean, the most down-trodden townships had a football club,
Organised in the depths of apartheid's granite years,
Despite everything, and for everything – Khutsong Rovers,
Gariiep United, listen, Thembisa Spurs, hmmm?,
Now, that's deep commonwealth for you.

Tenuous, but maybe, because
What really matters about empires, Father Mokesh
Presses his fingertips together, is infrastructure to go forth and
Controvert, like the Sermon on the Mount carried
By some misfit among Pontius Pilate's legionnaires.

Think so? And if so, so? - that's me.

And so we go
Conversing ourselves into a backyard commonwealth of human debate,
As the last rasta ambles down to Yeoville, memory fades from stone,
And Ponte's neon thirst throbs to life,
And the mine dumps abandon hope
Of new light from within their cyanided hearts, the answer
Is all of the above,
And this poem, from a koppie over our city, working
Its way now into the Commonwealth Institute's – colon
Slash-slash double-you double-you double-you
Where the sun, virtually, never sets
Is where the heart is dot – home-page.

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[Please email Jeremy](#) if you have questions about this poem. Please remember to include the name of the poem in the Subject: line!
