



## Keith Ellis

December 28, 2024

KEITH ELLIS, April 5, 1935 – December 28, 2024

Keith Audley Alexander Ellis, FRSC, DFil (University of Havana). CD (Jamaica), Professor Emeritus University of Toronto (Spanish and Portuguese), passed away peacefully on December 28, 2024, at the age of 89, after a life devoted to his family, learning, teaching and social justice through culture, especially literary culture.

Keith was born on April 5, 1935, in St. Mary, Jamaica, to Cora Joyce (Lazarus) and Charles Henry Alexander Ellis. He is the elder brother of his beloved surviving sisters: Claudette (Herman White), Jean (Keith Dixon), Marion (Dennis Taylor), Cherry (Orett Hart) and Christine (Ray Applewhaite). He is the deeply missed husband of Zilpha, the loving father of Carmen Marie (Robert Willetts) and the proud grandfather of Owen and Maxwell.

A scholarship student at Calabar High School, Keith taught Spanish and History there for 2 years following graduation. He earned his B.A. from the University of Toronto in just 2 years. While completing his graduate studies 4 years later at the University of Washington (Seattle) in Romance Literatures and Languages, he published on his key literary interests—the art of poetry and of prose narrative and humanitarian justice: an article on 3 poems by the Venezuelan writer Rafael Pineda, a key article on the Brazilian novel Dom

Casmurro, and various articles leading to his Ph.D thesis on the work of an exiled antifascist Spanish writer in the book, *El arte novelístico de Francisco de Ayala*.

After a year lecturing at the State University of New York (SUNY) Buffalo, Keith was hired back to the University of Toronto by his mentor Prof. Kurt Levy. His love of poetry and his recognition of the poetic genius of the Cuban national poet, Nicolás Guillén, inspired the largest part of his intellectual work over his long life of research and teaching for undergraduate and graduate courses and many books, articles and talks. His last book appeared in December 2023; and he gave a talk on the first Spanish poem he studied at the age of 11, to fellow patients in his long-term care home in 2024. His analysis of most of the outstanding Spanish American and Caribbean poets and leaders informed his understanding of the contribution of artistic culture to social progress (for example, his publications on Dr. Francia, José María Heredia, Rubén Darío, Vicente Huidobro, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Pablo Neruda, Jacques Roumain and Roberto Fernández Retamar). He actively promoted exhibitions of Cuban art, music and dance; and was led by his sense of social justice to his own practice of poetry.

Keith was also a gifted translator, both from Spanish to English and vice versa. He translated the major poetic work (*Versos libres*) of José Martí, revolutionary Cuba's apostle, a complex work which had not yet been translated in its entirety for more than one hundred and twenty years. He translated several anthologies of Nicolás Guillén's poems and taught and researched the subject of translation. He accepted Caribbean Nobel prizewinner Derek Walcott's invitation to translate his outstanding play, *The Joker of Seville* into Spanish; and he introduced Canadian writing to Cubans in Spanish translation. He published at the invitation of both Venezuela and Cuba bilingual anthologies of English-Caribbean poetry. Keith was determined to end the colonial divisions of American culture; and he was convinced that

sharing the cultural artifacts of these different languages would facilitate this goal.

Keith Ellis received many honours for his achievements in scholarship, teaching, cultural and social justice work. His life work is an inspiration to those who knew him and understood the motive for his outstanding contribution. He would feel honoured by donations to help sustain his beloved internationalist Revolutionary Cuba, through the provisions proposed by either (for Canadians):

The Canadian Network on Cuba (<http://www.canadiannetworkoncuba.ca>) and/or Toronto Forum on Cuba (<https://www.forumoncuba.com>), and (for USA citizens) Global Health Partners (<https://www.ghpartners.org/cuba2024/>).

A memorial service and celebration of Keith's life will be held in a few months.

# Tribute Wall

LK

“ I have been thinking about Professor Ellis recently and was saddened to see that he had already passed. I was a music student at UofT and wanted to go study music in Cuba and someone referred me to him for guidance. It was just before reading week and he said I was welcome to join him and his class on a field trip. It was the first of many trips back to Cuba on my own that ultimately led to 5 of the most amazing months of my life living in Havana and studying bata. It is now a few months after his passing, I hope I have not missed the celebration of life, I will keep checking for details.

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**Leela Khurana** - March 28, 2025 at 07:57 PM

JL

“ Dearest Zilpha, Carmen, Bob, Owen and Max, It is with the heaviest of heart that this news has belatedly come to me. Keith (and his family) was such a foundational presence in my, and my eventual family's life. His wisdom, joy, support, generosity and love of the arts will continue to stay with me for the rest of my life. Despite the time and distance that the pandemic put between my family and yours, you are so often in our thoughts and conversations. Louis, Amália and I are sending you all much love and peace from our new home in Sudbury. Love, Jessie

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**Jessie Lloyd** - March 22, 2025 at 10:29 AM

JM

“ I am at a loss for words. Keith has left a void that cannot be filled. We were all enriched by having him in our lives. Although he was far too humble to acknowledge it, I always insisted that everything I accomplished academically was due to him. He smiled and told me: "It's due to you." He educated me, guided me, inspired me, mentored me, supported me, and protected me. The lessons I learned from Keith, academically, professionally, socially, politically, economically, and ethically could fill a volume. He was the best man I ever met and the best man I ever knew. May you be in perpetual peace, Keith. I send my heartfelt condolences to Zilpha, Carmen, and all those who loved Dr. Keith Ellis. Sincerely, Dr. John Andrew Morrow

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**John Andrew Morrow** - February 07, 2025 at 11:46 AM

LG

“ My wife Marion and I have known our dear friend Keith for the better part of 70 years, since our times in Sir Daniel Wilson residence at UC. How delightful it was when Keith told one of his many stories, with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes, of life in Jamaica, of his adventures in Cuba, or of some human foibles. He was always generous - sharing his work, his social justice ideas and invitations to delicious meals in Chinatown. He and Zilpha made a great team - we remember being wakened in the wee hours in Rome by their excited call announcing little Carmen's arrival, and cherish the memories of their subsequent visit to our then home in Paris, and later to our cottage, where Keith found the mosquitoes most irksome. While we were students at the U of T, Keith valiantly tried his hand at skating - but in a burst of giggles vowed never to undertake this sport again. Keith was quick to point out the weaknesses in our political views, the shaky foundations of long held assumptions, and our unconscious biases, which was unsettling at first, but ultimately appreciated. Here was a man who well deserved his many awards and recognition, and for years was a close and constant friend to our family. You have enriched our lives beyond measure dear Keith - thank you. To Zilpha, Carmen and Bob, and Owen and Maxwell, we extend our heartfelt condolences.

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**Les and Marion Green** - January 15, 2025 at 10:05 AM

CW

“ I am saddened by the passing of Dr. Keith Ellis, my professor, mentor, and friend of 58 years. Not only was Keith my PhD thesis director, but he inspired in me a love of literary analysis and my devotion to the art of poetry, which has been the basis of my creative writing experience over the years.

*I will miss the frequent and spirited late night telephone discussions which provided the fuel for our continuing relationship to the very end of his time on earth. His spirit will continue to be with us until we are reunited beyond the grave.*

*Keith, may you rest in peace.*

*Cecil (and Pearlie) Wood*

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**Cecil Wood** - January 14, 2025 at 08:49 PM