



*Robert Brown*  
(1920–2010)

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Robert Brown, who died in July 2010 in his ninetieth year, worked in the philosophy of the social sciences and the philosophy of mind and made substantial contributions to the history of social theory.

Bob was born in New York and grew up there and in California before studying anthropology (with sociology and philosophy) at the University of New Mexico. After serving in the US Air Force during the war and beginning doctoral studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago (1946–48), he decided to switch from anthropology to philosophy, and gained his PhD at University College, London (1952). Here he became part of the lively group that formed around Freddy Ayer, and he always spoke with great appreciation of this experience, mentioning in particular Richard Wollheim. John Watling was a fellow student, together with whom Bob published his first papers (in *Analysis, Mind and Synthèse*). After a brief stint as an administrator of welfare services in Los Angeles, and a few years of lecturing at Californian colleges and at the University of Wisconsin, Bob was recruited in 1956 by Percy Partridge to join the Department of Social Philosophy in the Research School of Social Sciences at the new Australian National University in Canberra. Here he spent the rest of his career, though he transferred from the Philosophy Department to the History of Ideas Unit in 1974. He retired as a Professorial Fellow in 1985 but retained an active affiliation with the School. He was elected to the fellowship of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 1973, and to that of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1979.

With his dual background in social science and philosophy, Bob was unusually well suited for RSSS, as the School was always known. His competence on the social science side stretched far beyond anthropology, and in addition he cultivated a literacy in natural science that enabled him to make use of intelligent comparisons in his critical studies of social theory. In philosophy he was a sharply analytical mind of no fixed school but obviously deeply influenced by the conceptual and logical methods of the London thinkers with whom he had interacted. His independent

critical powers are on delightful display in his sharp and comprehensive review articles of J. L. Austin in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* in 1962 and 1963. The combination of these qualities led to a series of works in the philosophy of social science all of which are characterised by an unusually intricate interweaving of empirical and philosophical considerations. In addition to articles, the two main early works were *Explanation in Social Science* (1963) and *Rules and Laws in Sociology* (1973). These works are characterised by sharp criticism of the conceptual muddle-headedness with which much social science, in Bob's view, was being carried out. In the first book, he sorted out the ideas and functions of social description and social observation in order to argue that they are mutually distinct and that they do not rule out proper social explanation, which is then analysed into several categories, all extensively illustrated. *Rules and Laws in Sociology* follows this up with an analysis of the relationship between (1) definition, (2) statement of properties, (3) generalisation, and (4) explanation in sociology. Of particular importance was his distinction between social rules, social regularities and social laws, and his explanation that sociologists' predilection for the former two should not blind us to the possibility of genuine social laws, for example between group properties. A decade later, these works were complemented by a major historical study, *The Nature of Social Laws. Machiavelli to Mill* (1984), which provides one of the most comprehensive surveys of the historical attempts to come to clarity about law-like phenomena in the social world. Later Bob worked on a companion study of the history of social experiment, of which a few articles were published.

These works in philosophy of social science offer many ideas about the relation between psychology and social explanation, but Bob's interests in the philosophy of mind, broadly conceived, is mainly demonstrated in essays and critical reviews, and in a short monograph, *Analyzing Love* (1987). In these works he drew not only on his extensive knowledge of empirical and theoretical psychology, including his long-standing interest in psychoanalysis, but also on his remarkably wide reading in literature and literary criticism. Even so, they remain very much a philosopher's critical analyses.

Criticism in this field as well as in social science was even more on display in a significant number of review articles and shorter book reviews, many of them in *The Times Literary Supplement*. New work by Michel Foucault, Jonathan Lear, Zygmunt Bauman, Charles Taylor, Ian Hacking and many others was subjected to searching reading of a very high order.

Bob's qualities as a reader were greatly appreciated by generations of graduate students, both his own and those of others, and by many colleagues. His wide intellectual sympathies, combined with argumentative sharpness and an excellent sense of style, made him an invaluable critic. It also made him a good editor of a couple of essay collections and two discerning anthologies, *Between Hume and Mill: An Anthology of British Philosophy, 1749–1843* (1970) and *Classical Political Theories*,

*Plato to Marx* (1990), of which the former was a minor classic for a couple of decades. Not least, Bob was editor of *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (1973–1977).

Reader and writer, but not least conversationalist: Bob was of a generation when natural talent for intelligent and entertaining conversation was appreciated, and by him it was cultivated. In its heyday, the Tea Room at the Coombs Building of the ANU was a place for exceptionally good talk, and one of the long-standing contributors to this was Bob. Here his great range of knowledge, his ability to take an interest in the ideas of others, and his riches of wonderful anecdotes came into their own, something valued by the many academic visitors coming to the School over the years. For those who had the time for his deliberate and, at first, reticent manner, there was always something interesting in store. Those who did not have such time often mistook his quietness for lack of confidence or self-effacing modesty, but Bob suffered from neither; in fact, quietness was his form of self-assertiveness: if people did not have time to wait for a proper formulation of his point, he didn't want to spare the time to make it.

It is hard to think of two more different personalities than those of Bob Brown and Eugene Kamenka, yet they made an excellent team in the History of Ideas Unit, with Bob as the loyal support for Eugene's flamboyant creativity. If the Unit was Kamenka's great contribution to Australia's intellectual culture, it was in no small measure facilitated by Bob.

Outside of academe Bob was a fine sportsman of the gentlemanly sort: tennis, swimming, cross-country horse riding and shooting, both on the shooting range and in the field. For years one of his sources of relaxation was helping to keep down the rabbit invasions on his friend Stanley Benn's rural property. Friendship was one of Bob's great personal talents, and one can see dignified expressions of this in his obituaries of Stanley and of Eugene. Bob's and my friendship is now of necessity over, but the memory of him remains a source of happiness to me as, I am sure, it does to many others.

Bob was married twice, first to Paula Schuham, then to Tekla Shaw, both of whom have pre-deceased him. He is survived by the daughter of his second marriage, Kathryn Brown, and three grandchildren.

*Knud Haakonssen*

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<sup>1</sup> A slightly shorter version of this obituary was published in *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (2011), pp. 189–90.