



John Anthony Colmer

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JOHN COLMER died on Sunday, 24 April, 1994. He had been suffering for a year or more, but with such dignity and fortitude that few were aware of his plight. That was typical of John as soldier, scholar and gentleman.

A Research Fellow at Birmingham University, with a PhD from London, in August 1961 he joined the Department of English Language and Literature at Adelaide. It was the new age in which the University was dynamic with promise after the Murray Report. To its consummation John contributed memorably, both as scholar and teacher.

Born in Plymouth on 2 October 1921, he was educated at the City of Bath Boys School and trained as an assistant at the Bath Public Library until called up in 1941. For the next five years he served with distinction as trooper and sergeant in the 6th Royal Tank Regiment throughout the North Africa campaign and the subsequent invasion of Italy. He had refused a commission as a matter of conscience.

After graduating from Keble College, Oxford, he returned to Africa in his true role as scholar to take up a senior appointment (1949–60) at the new University College of Khartoum. It was there that he met his future wife Dorothy, also an Oxford graduate.

In Adelaide his ability was soon acknowledged by rapid promotion to a Readership and then a Chair, both in 1964. His reputation in the world of English studies was fully established with his election as a Fellow of the Academy in 1971. After my retirement the University appointed him, rather tardily in 1979, as my successor in the Jury Chair. On his own retirement the University of Singapore, with more alacrity, welcomed him as Visiting Professor, 1989–90.

Colmer's reputation was made originally with his book *Coleridge: Critic of Society* (1959). It at once achieved his aim to 'fill a gap in Coleridge studies . . . and reveal to the general reader an unexpected side of the poet's mind'. That end was furthered by his edition of Coleridge's *Church and State* (1976). The innovative and ranging scholarship of the introduction established his authority in what was to be his special field, that of the interrelation of literature and society, and the relevance of history and political theory to both.

That interest continued to determine his publications. They had also a popular side in his regular reviews for newspapers, particularly the *Australian*. Although he continued to write regularly on Coleridge, his later studies

was directed mainly to the modern novel and modern criticism, notably his two books on E.M. Forster and his probing survey of the writer as critic of society, *Coleridge to Catch-22: Images of Society* (1978).

Where the late Brian Elliott had pioneered in putting Adelaide in the forefront of the academic study of Australian literature, Colmer took over by introducing the more various study of Commonwealth Literature into the Department.

In fact this Australian Englishman helped to make us better known to ourselves as Australians; he has notably contributed to the appreciation and evaluation of the culture of this country. Not only was he the general editor of the series, *Studies in Australian Culture*, but himself wrote two books on Patrick White and largely initiated the study, both popular and scholarly, of Australian autobiography with both an anthology and a treatise. After his retirement colleagues and other friends presented him with a volume of their essays on *Aspects of Australian Fiction* (1990).

He had a flair for anthologies. A whole range of them, jointly edited with his wife, Dorothy, have pervasively enriched the teaching of literature in our schools. These were yet further demonstration of his versatility as teacher and communicator.

This scholar was also a sportsman. He had played rugger for Keble and was a keen tennis player throughout his life.

John Colmer was a man upright and positive in all his ways. Not surprisingly for one so sartorially elegant, he became in his later years absorbed in the art and practise of painting. It was an emanation of the sensibility that had regularly fertilised and humanised the demanding rigour of his intellect.

In his last conscious hours he gave a talk on James McAuley. The ladies of the Lyceum Club report that he spoke as one inspired. Thus ended this mannerly English scholar, explicating an Australian poet, and winning the plaudits of the audience with his urbanity and charm.

Prophetically he concluded this occasion with a quotation from McAuley:

Thus I have written, hoping to be read
A little now, a little when I'm dead.

That is his own modest epitaph. As always, John chose well.

Colin Horne.