

OBITUARIES

RALPH WARREN VICTOR ELLIOTT AM

1921-2012



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Ralph Elliott was born Rudolf Ehrenberg in Berlin on 14 August 1921 and died on 24 June 2012 in Canberra. He was a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and at various times served as its Treasurer and Deputy Secretary. On both sides of his German and Jewish family Elliott could, and frequently did, enumerate famous ancestors and relatives, academic, professional and more recently in the creative arts, a list that was topped by the name of Martin Luther. Ralph himself had a long, distinguished and eventful life, being caught up as a young man in the turmoils of Nazi Germany and the events of the Second World War. His parents sent him to the United Kingdom in 1936, where he attended school and began his university studies. During the war, he was interned on the Isle of Man and in Canada but returned, was trained as an officer (during which time he won the Sword of Honour, an achievement he always described in self-deprecating fashion), and fought on the British side against the Germans in 1945, nearly losing his own life. Later still, in 1959, he moved to Australia and lived, first in Adelaide and then in Canberra, until his death. He deposited the medal that he was awarded for his military service in the Australian War Memorial.¹

He often wrote about the defining events and people in his life, and they were of great importance to him. He remembered what happened when, where and to whom; the coincidences and dissonances of life struck him keenly, and one can see the same kind of ability to draw meaning from the particularities of place and specific texts in many of his scholarly writings. His charming autobiography and family history, *A Kilted Kraut: The Recollections of Rudolf Ehrenberg*, narrated by Ralph Elliott (2006), was published in a collection of his essays, *Chaucer's Landscapes and Other Essays*, in 2010 and gives a marvellous insight into what made Ralph tick. A shorter autobiography, 'One Life, Two Languages' was published in 2005 in a Japanese collection of autobiographies of scholars of medieval English.

Ralph Elliott's university career began when he enrolled at the University of St Andrews in 1939. However, his tertiary education was disrupted by war and he did not graduate MA until 1949. At St Andrews he specialised in English Language and Medieval Literature, and came under the influence of J. P. Oakden, whose major work was a study of Middle English alliterative poetry and whose interests also included the study of place-names, especially those of Northern England and Scotland. These interests, and Oakden's personal friendship, were undoubtedly what contributed most to Ralph's own academic development, as he began his career as a lecturer in English at St Andrews from 1949-52.

In 1952 Ralph accepted an offer of appointment to a lectureship in medieval English language and literature at the recently founded University College of North Staffordshire, later named the University of Keele, where he spent the next seven years. He published a number of articles during his Keele years, and became fascinated by the local landscape, which he linked, by means of exhaustive studies of its topographic vocabulary, to the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the other poems of the fourteenth-century manuscript BL Cotton Nero A. xv. He returned to this strand of literary detective work in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

Towards the end of his Keele years, for both personal and professional reasons, Ralph began to look for another position, and serendipity played its part when he found himself sitting on a bus during a conference next to Colin Horne, then Jury Professor of English at the University

1. See <http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/REL34675.002>.

of Adelaide and later a Fellow of the Academy (elected 1972). An offer of a Senior Lectureship at the University of Adelaide followed and Ralph came to Adelaide in what was to prove a permanent move to Australia. With him came his second wife Margaret Robinson, who was amongst other things a talented musician, and his two children by his first marriage; Ralph and Margaret subsequently had two children of their own. Ralph's very happy marriage to Margaret, whom he called, in a characteristic and deeply felt echo of the words of his ancestor Martin Luther, 'a good and precious wife', lasted until his death more than fifty years later.

The English Department at the University of Adelaide in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a marvellous and dynamic place, peopled by exceptionally talented staff and (one likes to think) excellent students. This was a period of expansion in the Australian university system, supported by new government money that came in as a result of the Murray Report (1957), and Ralph Elliott was one of the new faces made possible in this expansion. He brought with him knowledge of Old and Middle English and several of the related Germanic languages, Old Norse, Old High German and Gothic. Suddenly the doors to the study of all these languages and their medieval literatures were opened to students of English, as they had not been before, and one of the present writers well remembers her excitement on beginning Old and Middle English with Ralph and a small number of fellow students. His own enthusiasm for medieval English was infectious. We had great fun and learnt in ideal circumstances of small classes and expert teaching. Later Ralph offered Old Norse as an extra (it was not on the formal curriculum) and he, one of the present writers and a then tutor, John Anderson, who later took a position at the University of Manchester, used to meet in the lunch hour to study the Icelandic language and read extracts from sagas of Icelanders.

Ralph was promoted to Reader in English in 1961, but spent only four years at the University of Adelaide before being appointed Foundation Professor of English and Head of the School of Language and Literature, later the School of Humanities, at the University of Adelaide at Bedford Park which in 1966 became Flinders University. He always liked to joke, with typical linguistic playfulness, that he was one of the 'foundering fathers' of the University. (Though already appointed to the new university, he continued before it opened to teach at Adelaide University where the other of the present writers first encountered him, with lifelong effect, as a fascinating and engaging lecturer on the history of the English language.) Under his benign but forward-looking leadership, and with his appointment of some outstanding staff members, the English discipline rapidly established a high reputation, including in two new areas: Flinders was the first university (as opposed to teachers' college) in the British Commonwealth to teach

Children's Literature, a subject in which Ralph himself retained a strong interest over the years, and the University also became a leading centre of the study of the New Literatures in English. In the meantime Ralph continued to inspire honours students in Old and Middle English and Old Norse as well as supervising postgraduates in a range of topics. Beyond English he also made a huge contribution to the development of a vibrant School of Humanities of which he was twice chairman.

It must have been about this time that Ralph began one of his most endearing habits – that of always having a small teddy bear in the pocket of his jacket. One of the great pleasures on meeting him, especially in the company of children, was to ask this distinguished scholar which of his collection of bears he was carrying that day. Always a tiny teddy would appear from his pocket – generally not one seen before, usually carefully wrapped to avoid its being damaged. There must be very few men of such eminence who can be remembered in this way.

Ralph remained at Flinders until 1974, when he became the third Master of University House at the Australian National University in Canberra, a position he held for thirteen years until 1987, when he retired. He once said, half jokingly, to one of the present writers that he had always wanted to do two things, teach in a university and run a hotel, and that being Master would allow him to combine the two roles. The position certainly suited Ralph's gregarious and generous character, and it is generally acknowledged that he invigorated University House and brought it into the centre of Canberra life, academic, political and artistic. He remained vigorous after his retirement, and was appointed an Honorary Professor in the English Department at the Australian National University, where he taught classes in Old and Middle English and supervised postgraduate students for some years to the point where he was able to boast that he had been teaching for fifty years. He also played an important role at the Humanities Research Centre, where he was Honorary Librarian from 1990–2005 at what is now known as the Ralph Elliott Library. Typical of his practical bent in bringing knowledge of the English language to the general public, Ralph ran a very popular fortnightly talkback linguistics session on local Canberra radio for ten years from 1990. Honours and recognition of his contribution to Australian cultural life came through several awards, notably his membership of the Order of Australia (1990) and a Centenary Medal (2001).

Although Ralph Elliott was thoroughly at home in the whole field of English literature, his contribution to scholarship in the form of publications was made in three major areas, the study of Middle English poetry, specially alliterative poetry, and in particular *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which he followed his mentor Oakden;

runology, in which he was a pioneer, at least in the English language; and the writings of Thomas Hardy, especially their debt to the Middle Ages. It is unusual among contemporary humanities academics to find such a breadth of competence, and to some extent Ralph's expertise reflects the situation of English Studies in the first half of the twentieth century rather more than the specialisations of the present time. To some extent also his thorough grounding in English and Germanic philology allowed him to cover an immense amount of ground with assurance and skill, something that also shone through in his teaching and was of enduring benefit to his students.

One thing that is striking in Ralph's writings on both Middle English poetry and the works of Thomas Hardy is his interest in and sensitivity to these literary works' sense of place, something that also comes through, as remarked earlier, in his accounts of his own life as a displaced person making a new home for himself several times over. Landscape and the representation of landscape dominate his writings and he approaches these subjects through a detailed study of English words, not just any words, but medieval words, often dialectal words, for various features of the landscape. It is easy to see why he was so fond of Hardy, his poetry and his novels set in rural Dorset, easy also to see why the Gawain poet fascinated him and why he was always intrigued by place names, old and new.

The third of Ralph's contributions to scholarship, in the field of runology, cannot be accounted for in the same way. It came about initially for purely practical reasons: as a young lecturer at St Andrews, he was asked to give an Honours course on runes, but discovered there was no introduction to this subject he could recommend to his students. So, typical of him, he wrote one and it became something of a best seller. The first edition of *Runes: An Introduction* came out in 1959, and was reprinted in 1963, 1971 and 1980, the third time being issued in paperback. He published a second edition in 1989, bringing the book up to date with augmented chapters, especially on the new and exciting discoveries from the old Hanseatic quarter of Bergen in Norway and other archaeological finds that were unknown when he wrote the first edition.

There was no introductory book on runes in the English language when the first edition of *Runes* was published, and it also predated the advent of a more general interest in the subject during the 1960s and later that came about largely through the influence of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and other works of modern, medievalist fantasy literature and film. Several of Ralph's more recent lectures and writings on runes address the reception of runes and runology in modern times and show how attuned he was to the burgeoning public interest in this field. Although now his *Runes: An Introduction* competes with more specialist writings, it still holds its own as a general survey of the subject, and is particularly good on runic inscriptions from the British Isles.

Ralph Elliott was an exceptionally fine scholar, a gifted teacher, and an inspiring and effective administrator, but those who knew him will perhaps best remember him as a man of extraordinary generosity of spirit. This quality showed itself in all his roles, as father and husband, teacher and supervisor, academic leader and researcher, administrator and host. Chaucer's Host was one of his favourite literary characters and the role of host suited his love of conviviality, laughter, good food and good wine and his generosity in sharing it with others. However throughout the part of his academic life known to us, and presumably in the years before, nothing apparently gave Ralph more pleasure than encouraging others, urging them on to achieve at their best, mentoring, supporting, contacting other people on their behalf, not just enjoining them to do well, but actively helping them. One of the two present writers owes the publication of his first book to Ralph's active intervention and encouragement: 'I have written to the editor of the series. He's expecting a book proposal from you.' He extended this generous help, not just to family and friends, not just to students and colleagues, but to anyone who swam into his ken and seemed to him to deserve encouragement. The many people who remember Ralph Elliott for the help, support and advice he gave to them will ensure that this great and good man of ample and generous spirit is not forgotten.

MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS FAHA
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