



Francis William (Bill) Kent
(1942–2010)

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Francis William ('Bill') Kent was an internationally renowned scholar of Renaissance Florence, proud of his origins in Footscray, the western suburbs of Melbourne, and infinitely generous in his promotion of the study of humane letters in Australia.¹ Through his teaching and his writing he helped transform our awareness of the forces of household, lineage, local community and patronage that helped make Florence the turbulent and creative city it was. And as his stature in his field increased, he used his own considerable patronage to ensure that talent and commitment, rather than household and lineage, would be the determining factors in creating a community of scholars in his field.

Bill Kent was shaped by primary school (where he did cleaning after school to assist his widowed mother and sister) and high school in Footscray with the first generation of post-war migration, and by undergraduate studies, funded by a Teachers' College Scholarship, at the University of Melbourne, from which he graduated in 1963 with First Class Honours and a shared Exhibition in History. His mentor during these years was Ian Robertson, himself a major inspiration in building up a distinctively Australian 'school' of Italian Renaissance history – as evidenced by a commemorative volume in Robertson's honour that Bill edited with Charles Zika, *Rituals, Images, and Words: Varieties of Cultural Expression in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005). The title chosen for that volume identifies the interdisciplinary form of cultural history, grounded in a respect for social and political realities, that Robertson promoted in many of his students, no more so than with Bill Kent.

Bill Kent's intellectual career always straddled Australia and Europe, with Florence operating as the intellectual lodestone for his interests and friendships. He completed a Diploma of Education, in accordance with his scholarship conditions, and was permitted to meet his bond obligations as a Teaching Fellow and then Senior Teaching Fellow at the Department of History at Monash University, 1965–67. There he shared in the idealism of a University still in its infancy, teaching

'Renaissance Florence' with the late Louis Green, whose luminous obituary Bill wrote for these *Proceedings* when he himself was seriously ill. In 1967 a Commonwealth Scholarship took him to Westfield College at the University of London, where he received his PhD in 1971. With his first wife, fellow historian Dale Kent, he studied with Nicolai Rubinstein, absorbing the rich and rigorous tradition of *Kulturgeschichte* embodied in Warburg Institute and its brilliant community of scholars, many of them refugees from Nazi Europe. He also mixed with an emerging generation of renowned Renaissance scholars. With Australian boldness, he both mastered the intellectual demands of the Warburg tradition, and developed his own insight into the social context of a culture traditionally studied only at the level of its elites. And as his contemporary Alison Brown recalled in Prato in May 2010, Bill brought fresh air to stuffy salons. She related:

Let me tell you a story about them in the context of the Rubinsteins' apartment in Church Row in Hampstead in London, where their books were housed. The library was at the front of the house, adjacent to their elegant sitting room; the dining room down a long thin corridor at the back.

It was the custom at dinner parties in those days, for men to remain behind at the dinner-table after eating, to drink spirits together, while the women were led down the long corridor back into the sitting room to drink coffee and water and await the return of their men. Bill rapidly broke with this immemorial British custom.

One evening, when we were having dinner together at the Rubinsteins', he refused to remain behind to drink with the men but at once came with us women into the sitting room, pausing at the library en route – only to be followed by the remaining men as soon as they heard the laughter and dynamic conversation we were enjoying without them – and never again, to my knowledge, did the Rubinsteins separate their guests in this way.

In 1971 Bill returned to Australia, where he joined the Department of History at Monash University as a Lecturer, rising to Senior Lecturer in 1977, Reader in 1980, and Professor of History, with a Personal Chair, in 1989. Numerous invitations to prestigious centres of learning in both Europe and North America enabled Bill to maintain and develop significant intellectual friendships and cement his international reputation. He was a Fellow at Villa I Tatti, the Harvard Center for Italian Renaissance Studies in Florence, in 1977–78, and a Visiting Professor there in 1986–87. In 1987, he was a British Academy Visiting Professor in London, and holder of a Christensen Visiting Fellowship at St Catherine's College Oxford. He was again honoured by I Tatti in 1995–96 with the Robert Lehman Visiting Professorship.

Bill's publications are distinguished by impeccable familiarity with the documentary and archival sources for the history of Florence, coupled with imaginative and sympathetic understanding of the families, both great and small, that helped shape its society. From his doctoral studies, he published *Household and Lineage in*

Renaissance Florence: the Family Life of the Capponi, Ginori, and Rucellai (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), and then with Dale Kent, *Neighbours and Neighbourhood in Renaissance Florence: the District of the Red Lion in the Fifteenth Century* (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin, 1982). Bill's fascination with uncovering little-known documentary sources, rich in significance, is well illustrated by his co-operation with Gino Corti in editing *Bartolommeo Cederni and his Friends: Letters to an Obscure Florentine* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1991). Over the years, Bill became increasingly interested in the visual arts, pioneering co-operation with art historians in understanding the role of patronage. Following an international conference convened by Patricia Simons for the HRC in 1983, Bill and Pat, with J. C. Eade, edited an important volume of essays, *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Increasingly, Bill's scholarly focus turned to Florence's 'patron-in-chief', Lorenzo de' Medici. On the death of Nicolai Rubinstein, he took over the mammoth project of directing the critical edition of Lorenzo's letters, while continuing his own research in the archives. As well as publishing a series of ground-breaking articles, he delivered the James S. Schouler Lectures at Johns Hopkins University in 1999, subsequently published as *Lorenzo de' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). His study of the young Lorenzo, as well as a volume of essays, will be published posthumously.

As a teacher, Bill brought to life the complexity of urban experience. At Monash University, he was part of a History Department where there has long been a strong interest (nurtured not least by Professor Graeme Davison) in urban experience, whether in Australia, Europe or North America. His ability to make connections between the experience of the suburbs of Quattrocento Florence and those of Melbourne had a huge influence on the generations of students whom he taught, a number of whom went on to become teachers themselves. He was also profoundly interested in friendship as a lived social reality that still constitutes society today as much as it did in the past. Not only did Bill have an intuitive understanding of friendship's complexities, but he was also deeply versed in how this art could be practised. He was a willing collaborator with many scholars, perhaps most profoundly with Carolyn James, his partner since 1987, with whom he wrote (among other things) a long essay on friendship in the Renaissance and early modern period, published within *Friendship. A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009).

Through his influence Renaissance Florence was (and still is) taught in many schools in Victoria by teachers who had themselves been captured by his imaginative gift, and imbibed his love not just of history but also of the study of humane letters. His focus on the power of community in shaping the culture of the Quattrocento was one which always sought out connections with other places, other times. There was never a gulf between what was 'medieval' and what was 'Renaissance'. Through the many graduates whom he nurtured, he found his own varied interests taken much

further. Bill was unusually open to the new directions they promoted, whether in terms of social analysis, gender or religion. His doctoral students – in particular Peter Howard, Nicholas Eckstein, Natalie Tomas, Cecilia Hewlett, Ersie Burke and David Rosenthal – constitute a ‘stable’ that has continued a synthetic approach to Renaissance society and culture, notable both for its rigour and its interdisciplinarity.

Perhaps the most demanding of all the duties that Bill undertook, began in 1984, when he became part of a committee to establish an Australian Study Centre in Italy, and subsequently inherited from Ian Donaldson in 1991 the chairmanship of the Arthur Boyd Foundation, regenerated in a different form as the Australian Foundation for Studies in Italy. Kent himself tells the complex story of the project to create an Australian house of study in Italy that could stand alongside the British School in Rome, Harvard’s I Tatti, or any of the other great institutions represented in Italy, in a volume that he edited, with Ros Pesman and Cynthia Troup, *Australians in Italy* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2008). Notwithstanding long and arduous efforts by both Ian Donaldson and Bill Kent, the Australian government never dared to commit itself to such a venture. Yet the venture did succeed, albeit under a new guise. Through skill and persistence, Bill managed to persuade the authorities at Monash University – only after knocking on the doors of numerous potential benefactors – to commit to establishing a base at the Palazzo Vaj at Prato, a city that is only twenty minutes by train from Florence, but has proudly guarded its own identity since the Middle Ages. With the help of generous friends and patrons, not least the support of the President of the Region of Tuscany, Monash eventually committed itself to the project. Bill became the foundation director of the Monash Centre at Prato, which opened its doors on 17 September 2001. He returned to Australia in 2004, becoming an Australian Professorial Fellow in 2005 and an Emeritus Professor at Monash University on his retirement in June 2010. An achievement that gave him great pride was to secure the bequest of the private library of Nicolai Rubinstein for the Prato Centre. This now constitutes the core of the Bill Kent Library at Prato. In a profound sense, the legacy of two great scholars of Renaissance Florence has come together.

In establishing the Prato Centre, Bill did more than help Monash University establish a presence in Europe that continues to grow. He provided a space and home for scholars from all over Australia to experience Italy and to meet with their peers in a city that is itself eager to assert its own identity against its more famous neighbours. Bill identified with its boldness, and desire to carve out its own identity, perhaps because it mirrored something in his own life. He loved to share with his friends and colleagues the excitement of the opportunity to create a genuine community, free of false flattery. He understood the complex webs of client-patron relationships still essential to get anything done in Italy. At the same time, he stood apart from its stultifying side-effects, never compromising the commitment to scholarship that drove his enthusiasm to promote humane studies.

Bill's dry, self-effacing humour, helped create a sense of community wherever he found himself. He was angered by the manipulation and self-serving character of the administrative reforms imposed on universities, above all by their consequences on individual scholars who fell foul of authorities by virtue of speaking out. His enthusiasm for teaching, combined with unflinching honesty and persistence, served as a beacon for his colleagues, and sets a standard for all who seek to be part of the community of letters. At a memorial service held at Monash University on 30 August 2010, the Vice-Chancellor of the University posthumously bestowed on him the degree of Doctor of Letters. The Bill Kent Foundation Fund (www.monash.edu/giving/billkent) has been established in his memory to provide continuing support for the library in Prato and initiatives such as conferences, scholarships and fellowships in the area of medieval and Renaissance studies. He is survived by Carolyn and their son James and daughter Antonia, and by Margaret his daughter with Dale Kent, and grandchildren Oskar and Amelia.

Constant J. Mews

1 I am indebted to Nerida Newbigin and Ros Pesman for their assistance in writing this obituary.