



*Professor W Ritchie*  
*(1927–2004)*

## *William Ritchie* (1927–2004)



A much respected figure of the Australian Classics scene, who had been President of both the Australian Society for Classical Studies (1978–9) and the Classical Society of NSW (1966–7), passed away on 29 July 2004. Though Bill Ritchie was born in Launceston, Tasmania, one tended to connect him almost entirely with Sydney and Cambridge. From the former he derived his schooling at SCEGS, his undergraduate education – during which he learned Greek with Guy Manton – and his employment from 1955 until his retirement in 1991. From the latter he derived the PhD that he studied for under Denys Page (1957), friendships, memories, and a lasting relationship with Pembroke College – to which I once walked across when on Study Leave to collect and use his Liddell and Scott Greek Lexicon (not a volume to take on planes!). The connection with Cambridge did not stop his involvement with some distinctly Australian projects, such as the founding of the Australian Society for Classical Studies and its journal, publication of the Australian Humanities Research Council collection of notes on Menander (with three other Sydney scholars) in 1959, and of course the beginnings of the Academy itself. By its founding in 1969, Bill had for four years held the Chair of Greek at Sydney, a position that he would have obtained on the strength of his principal publication, *The Authenticity of the Rhesus of Euripides*, dating from 1964. Though based upon his Cambridge PhD thesis (1957), the book is still compulsory reading for anybody interested in that play.

The last publication of Bill Ritchie that I recall reading, sadly, was his obituary for his friend and successor Kevin Lee, which appeared in the 2001 *Proceedings* of this Academy. It would have been a painful task for him to write of the loss of a great contributor to his own field of Greek tragedy. Much more welcome to him would have been the eventual appointment of his former pupil Peter Wilson, again a tragedy specialist, to the Chair of Classics to succeed Kevin. The future of research into Greek tragedy at the University of Sydney now seems assured for some time to come.

In many ways the thing that most motivated Bill was the future of his pupils, expertly trained to fulfil distinguished roles in Classics in a number of Commonwealth countries. In these sad days when a sharp wedge is driven between research and scholarship, it would have to be said that it was scholarship, whether his own, his colleagues' or his pupils', that he promoted most vigorously. In my early days

as a colleague, from late 1973, I still feel that I learned far more about scholarship from my compulsory attendance at Greek Department morning teas (Wednesdays excepted, naturally!) than I had done during my studies at UK universities. Morning tea was the occasion for the preservation of Classics folklore, including reminiscences of the brief tenure of the Greek Chair by Enoch Powell before the outbreak of World War II, and more insightful reports of Bill's years under A. D. Trendall. But morning tea often held some daunting surprises when colleagues produced obscure passages of fiendish Greek and sought the company's help in evaluating a variety of interpretations. Worst of all were the occasions when each of us came armed with a portfolio of excruciating Greek passages for consideration for the honour of inclusion in the Honours Unseen Translation Examination.

As somebody who lived alone, though with a mother (until recently) and a brother not far away, Bill valued the company of both academic and secretarial staff. Accordingly, there was a warmth about one's four-times-weekly initiation which made it one of the pleasanter parts of one's duty – unless perhaps one forgot one's tie in the heat of a February moment. Bill presided over the period when, in the thinking of Canberra and its minions, the eventual quality of one's students was a consideration of no consequence compared with their sheer quantity. This presented special challenges for a department that could indeed teach Greek from the beginning, but could never hope to train more than a handful of such recruits to achieve the accustomed standards. For these standards had tended to come naturally to the former pupils of some excellent teachers in Sydney's few elite schools teaching ancient Greek. Rather than retreat into his natural conservatism, and without encouragement from the Chair of Latin, Bill therefore participated in the introduction of courses on classical literature in translation. Some of these now attract numbers that make it much easier to justify the continuation of a well-staffed Classics outfit at the University of Sydney, and fully vindicate his decision.

During these testing times Bill worked intermittently on what he hoped would become a full commentary on Euripides' Iphigeneia in Aulis, but although drafts were left, his perfectionism was such that he was unable ever to complete it to his satisfaction. Although a man of few words in a wider way, he occasionally presented conference papers relating to the play, but published little. Nor did he ever contribute as an author to *Antichthon*, Journal of the Australian Society for Classical Studies, of which he was a founding editor, continuing in that role from vol. 1 (1967) until vol. 6 (1972). However, his Cambridge colleagues succeeded in obtaining an important piece of his on lines 919-74 of the Iphigeneia play for a Festschrift for Denys Page, his former supervisor. It is in some ways a tragedy that Bill's undoubted scholarship has not left a wider legacy in print form, but his legacy is rather different. He will be remembered as an important influence by former pupils now firmly established in their careers, some in Chairs, others in different academic or teaching positions, and some in other fields besides – many of whom now have lasting links with the

academic endeavours of the University of Sydney or the closely associated Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens. I understand that his valuable collection of books will also shortly join those of Kevin Lee at the University of Sydney. He also leaves yet another chapter in the rich folklore of University of Sydney Classics.

*Harold Tarrant*