



John Douglas Ritchie
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Emeritus Professor John Ritchie, AO, FrHistS, FAHA, FASSA, Hon FRAHS, son of John and Evelyn Ritchie, was born at East Melbourne on 4 April 1941 and educated at Northcote High School and Trinity College, University of Melbourne. He was a middle distance runner of distinction, once competing against the great athlete Herb Elliott. After graduating with honours in history he did a DipEd and then became a teaching fellow at Monash University in 1964. He completed a PhD in history at the Australian National University, on the subject of the Bigge Inquiry into convict transportation in Australia (later a major book) and Professor C M H Clark soon after appointed him to a lectureship in history at the ANU Faculties in 1969.

John Ritchie became a legendary teacher, first in British history and then for many years in Australian history. He taught a survey course in first year which for many students formed the basis of their later development in their knowledge of Australian history, even through to doctoral level. No one took his mentorship of promising young students more seriously, or took more pride in a thorough preparation of tutorials and lectures. From the 1970s he was a key member of the team of teachers of Australian history, which developed at ANU around Manning Clark and included Don Baker, Bob Gollan, Barbara Penny, Eric Fry, Ian Hancock, John Merritt and John Molony. This inspirational group of teachers and scholars launched the careers of many historians currently heading academic departments, museums and archives all over the country.

Ritchie, attired in his old university gown, each year gave a series of meticulously prepared lectures to an ever-growing number of students. His lectures were a model of presentation, renowned for drama, wit, clarity and erudition: each was a tour de force and Ritchie rapidly acquired a cult status among students of every stamp. He was also an early and consistent proponent of using photographs, paintings, film and other dimensions of visual culture to enhance his vivid rhetorical style. Structure and

the development of an argument were submerged into a flowing narrative, which became a form of high entertainment as well as an inducement for students to meet his rigorous scholarly standards. In that way he attracted a multitude of students to the discipline of history. Many of his lectures were revisited annually by former students, who also encouraged their friends to take his course.

His tutorials were tightly controlled exercises designed to facilitate taking the first steps in the systematic use of primary sources. The essays, rigorously marked both as to content and structure, were used not merely to develop his students' knowledge of the subject but also to ensure that they carried into later life a conviction that to write English with clarity, correct spelling, proper punctuation and a sense of direction was a hallmark of a fully educated person. Later-year teachers only had to look at the bibliography in a student's essay to recognise Ritchie's share in the making of the student. He ensured that students went to their sources and made a proper record of their use and he gave his students an unparalleled sense of the richness and possibility of archival research. He was courageous enough on occasion to invite promising undergraduates to lecture in his course, a privilege which launched the careers of several professional historians.

Convinced that a sense of place was fundamental to the study of history, Ritchie took great pains to organise field trips for his students to Sydney, to the Macquarie Towns and to Victoria's Northeast. In this respect he anticipated the modern historical fascination with recapturing and seeking to experience the culture of everyday life in the past. He also played a major role in offering weekend residential study sessions for teachers and students from local schools and the outlying country areas. The University, as well as the History Department, benefited from a subsequent growth in enrolments. During the early 1980s he annually taught a popular History IV subject on 'Biography and History,' which not only led many graduates and postgraduates to undertake biographical higher research, but also laid the basis for the theoretical and historiographical interest in the subject of biography that became a feature of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* under Ritchie's later leadership.

During the twenty years Ritchie gave to teaching he somehow found time to pursue a prolific and distinguished career of scholarly research and writing. He first turned to the material of his PhD from which two notable publications were drawn, *Punishment and Profit* (1970) and *The Evidence to the Bigge Reports* (1972). A popular history aimed especially at school-age students, *Australia as Once We Were*, followed in 1975. Enriched by several years of thought and research, some of it done while on sabbatical leave in the British Isles, his masterly work, *Lachlan Macquarie: A Biography*, came out in 1986, now justly regarded as an Australian classic. He more than any other historian was responsible for Macquarie's pre-eminent standing among Australia's founding fathers. During those years Ritchie successfully edited the journal *Labour History* and helped thereby to establish it on a national footing.

He made a wide contribution to the life of the University from 1971 to 1975 as Deputy Warden of Burton Hall and became Acting Warden in 1976. He undertook the responsible duties of Acting Dean of the Faculty of Arts in 1986 and 1987 and remained mindful that his proper function was to serve the Faculty rather than control it.

In 1988 Ritchie published *A Charge of Mutiny* and was appointed a professorial fellow (professor 1992) in the Research School of Social Sciences and General Editor of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* in succession to Geoffrey Serle. His experience as an author and editor had equipped him admirably for this task, but nothing could have prepared him for the rigours of a position that had contributed to the ill-health of the three previous editors.

Ritchie committed himself unstintingly to the grind of guiding thousands of short biographies through the process of their development from often ill-formed manuscripts to polished entries in the *Dictionary*. By 2002 he had seen volume 11 through the press, edited volumes 12 to 15 and co-edited volume 16 with Di Langmore. A Herculean workload contributed to his legendary punctiliousness and also made him the longest-serving General Editor of this justly celebrated biographical enterprise. It was an achievement that helped to bring him the honours of an Order of Australia, an Australian Dictionary of Biography Medal, a Centenary of Federation Medal and election to no less than four Learned Academies. In his spare time he researched and wrote an exemplary biography of his own: *The Wentworths, Father and Son* (1997). The volume dealt thoroughly with the father, Darcy Wentworth and took the son, William Charles, through his formative years. Volume two of this monumental work was tragically interrupted by a stroke in 2001.

Throughout his life John Ritchie was never one to play for popularity among his peers and even less towards those above him. He stuck by his convictions and uttered them without fear. In some ways conservative, he was nevertheless deeply sympathetic to his juniors, as he was in his historical writing to the downtrodden and the poor. With his high principles, his devotion to work and to what he saw as his duty, he spared neither himself nor others. A lover of good food and fine wine, of the opera and of ballet, of literature (above all Dickens) and a virtuoso joke-teller, Ritchie was loyal to his family, to his God, to his friends, to his country and to his football club, Carlton. Before all else Ritchie cherished his private life at home. There, with his wife and son, Joan and Christopher, John Ritchie, teacher, editor, historian and genuine Australian, lived out the roles he held most dear: those of husband and father.

Iain McCalman and John Molony