



*Keith Val Sinclair*

*Reproduced with thanks to Dr Peter Rolfe Monks.*

**Keith Val Sinclair**  
**(1926–1999)**

Emeritus Professor Keith Val Sinclair, the Foundation Secretary of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, died on 25th January 1999 in his seventy-third year. His career path took him from dux of his primary school in Brooklyn, Wellington, New Zealand, to international acclaim as a teacher, scholar and academic leader.

Keith Sinclair was born on 8th November 1926 in Auckland. His middle name Val was a version of his father's first names, Leslie Valentine. The early years were financially difficult as a result of his parents' divorce, but his mother who raised him was constantly supportive of her son's ambitions. Keith conceived a passion for academic pursuits during his studies at the Victoria University, Wellington. His special field, as a skilled linguist, was to become medieval French literature and history, but his interests also ranged widely across many facets of the culture of France and of Europe more generally.

Keith Sinclair is well remembered by generations of students and colleagues in Australia and the United States, not only in French Studies but amongst medieval scholars worldwide. His former students recall him with affection, as a stylish and sophisticated lecturer, who mixed an infectious enthusiasm for his subject with a sharp sense of irony. His colleagues knew him simply as KVS, with that unmistakable mix of a lofty approach to intellectual issues and a down to earth appreciation of other people's sensitivities.

During a long and outstanding career, he earned doctorates in France, at Oxford and in New Zealand, together with honorary degrees from James Cook University and from the University of Sydney. At the same time international honours were showered upon him: not only was he an Officer of the Order of Australia, but had received prestigious decorations in France, Belgium, Italy and Luxembourg, and was—most impressive of all—a Knight Commander of Grace and Cross of Merit of the Sovereign Order of St John of Jerusalem.

After completing his studies in Wellington while supporting himself through a variety of odd jobs, Keith Sinclair worked his way to Europe as an ordinary seaman in order to take up a French Government Postgraduate Scholarship in 1949. In Paris he achieved both a bachelor's degree and a doctorate and attended classes for archivists at the *École des Chartes* and for historians at the IVe Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. It was subsequently at Oxford that his abiding interest in Anglo-Norman texts was first crystallised through his contacts with the distinguished Old

French expert, Alfred Ewert. Keith had a humanitarian side to his character, and he spent summers in post-war Berlin caring for orphaned youngsters.

In 1955, Keith Sinclair came to Australia to take up a post at the then Canberra University College in the French Department headed by Professor Derek Scales. At that time he began an academic publishing career that ended only with his death by preparing a ground breaking descriptive catalogue of medieval manuscripts held in Australia. Well over one hundred books and articles spread over more than forty years explored an enormous variety of texts from the Middle Ages, with special emphasis on the Anglo-Norman dialect, on prayer books and on the narrative poem he made his own special preserve, *Tristan de Nanteuil*. A measure of his eminence in his field is to be found in the volume of studies in his honour published in 1994 by a galaxy of medieval scholars.

From 1963 to 1971, KVS was Senior Lecturer then Associate Professor at the University of Sydney. Among his services to a variety of professional bodies at this time the most important was no doubt his part in the creation of the Australian Academy of the Humanities of which he was the Foundation Secretary from 1969 to 1971. He also served on the Council from 1969 to 1973, was Treasurer in 1971–1972 and maintained a keen and continuing interest in the affairs of the Academy as a member from their inception of the Electoral Sections for Art History and for European Languages and Literature. From 1965 to 1972 he was Treasurer of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association and in 1967 co-founder of the then Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1972, Keith took up a teaching position at the University of Connecticut that gave him the opportunity to make his mark on the broader scene of the United States. He chose, however, to return to Australia in 1980, to the Chair of French at the James Cook University of North Queensland, where he continued vigorously to exercise his talents as teacher, researcher and administrator until 1991.

In retirement in Townsville then Canberra, his activities continued unabated. In a sense, his final research interests mark a return to his origins, with the publication in 1998 of an annotated translation of the journals of the French navigator Laplace, who explored New Zealand waters in 1830. A translation of the Australian leg of the voyage remained incomplete at his death, which he faced during months of painful illness with admirable courage and the positive spirit that had characterised his life. He was supported in death as in life by the devoted friendship of Dr Peter Rolfe Monks, a medieval scholar of distinction in his own right.

Keith Sinclair was an only child, and both his parents predeceased him.

Medieval Studies and French Studies mourn and salute the passing of the grand old man of these disciplines in our country—but who of those of us who knew him can possibly think of Keith Sinclair as old or believe that he has left us?

*A A Martin*