



Ronald Thomas Sussex
(1909–2006)

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Ronald Sussex, who was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Academy of the Humanities in 1977, died in Melbourne on 19 September 2006 at the age of 96. Born into the family of a Methodist minister in the goldfields of Western Australia in 1909, his early life was marked, as was the lot of children of the manse at that time, by frequent changes of residence and his basic education was gained at The Friends' School, Hobart (where he developed a firm respect for Quaker values and where his name still appears on the school's honour boards) and Wesley College, Melbourne. His interest in religious questions was maintained in his undergraduate years by active membership of the Australian Student Christian Movement, which at that time played a significant role in university student life. At the University of Melbourne, he completed the degree of MA in French and an LLB, after which he taught for a time at Melbourne Grammar School, earning money to finance his plans for overseas study.

In 1936, he began research at the University of Paris, where he completed a thesis for the degree of Docteur de l'Université de Paris on *L'Idée d'humanité chez Émile Verhaeren* in 1938. This thesis was published in Paris as a book in the same year. Returning to Melbourne, he was appointed Vice Master of Queen's College and worked for a time in the Registrar's Department at the University of Melbourne.

It was not until 1942 (the year in which he married) that he began teaching in the Department of French at the University of Melbourne under the late Professor A R Chisholm, to whom he provided notable administrative as well as teaching support, rising through the ranks to the level of Associate Professor. In 1956, he was appointed Professor of Modern Languages at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, where he worked until 1970, moving then to James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, where he remained until his retirement in 1979.

Ron Sussex was a reserved, almost shy man. He was an erudite lover of books and music and had a strong interest in the history of human civilization and especially in French culture. His son Roland comments that 'he would have been saddened by what has happened to the modern curriculum: a French scholar was not only incomplete but somehow inconceivable without Corneille, Racine, Molière and the big books, which he knew and loved'. Throughout his life, he hated racism and bigotry: the diary he kept during his student years in France reveals that, when he visited Germany shortly before the outbreak of World War II, he was disgusted by what he saw of rising Nazism.

Those who were his students say that he was a conscientious, if demanding, lecturer, who prepared his material thoroughly and took a genuine interest in the welfare of his students. He also took his teaching beyond the walls of the university to help underprivileged people in whom he saw talent. As an administrator, he was equally thorough and efficient in organising the work of his staff, especially when Head of Department in New Zealand and in Queensland and applied those same skills in promoting the cause of French language and culture in the wider community.

Sussex's direct contribution to research was focused on a set of specific questions. Apart from the book on the Belgian poet Verhaeren mentioned above, his main research interest lay in French regional literature, where his most important work is a study in English of Henri Bosco, whose writings are centred in his native Provence (*Henri Bosco, Poet-Novelist*, Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1966). This is a well researched, well constructed and eminently readable study of the work of a distinguished writer who is not well known in the English-speaking world. A small collection of studies brought together in a synthetic presentation was published in 1979 under the title *Home and the Homeland Novel: Studies in French Regional Literature* (Townsville: James Cook University). The following year, after his retirement, the same university published a set of essays with a different emphasis: *The Sacrificed Generation: Studies of Charles Péguy, Ernest Psichari and Alain-Fournier* (Townsville: James Cook University, 1980).

But the most influential contribution to academic research made by Sussex was in what he brought to his beloved profession. He took a leading part in the establishment of the Australasian Universities Modern Language Association (later the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association, AULLA) in 1951, was Chairman of its standing committee from an early date and was the editor of its journal *AUMLA* from its foundation in 1953 until his retirement in 1979. He was elected President of the International Federation of Modern Languages and Literatures in 1975 for three years (the first Australian to be elected to that position), after serving as Vice President from 1967 to 1972. In these roles he contributed massively to the stimulus and to the framework needed by language and literature scholars, particularly the younger academics, working in Australian and New Zealand universities for the publication of research and it was this contribution to learning that motivated his election as an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1977.

Ron Sussex is survived by his wife Marian (the well-known Melbourne artist), his son Roland (who has the Chair of Applied Language Studies at the University of Queensland) and his daughters Polly (Dr Mary-Grace Sussex, Auckland-based musician and musicologist) and Lucy (Dr Lucy Sussex, Melbourne critic, writer and editor). The achievements of his family were a source of warm satisfaction to Ron Sussex.

Elliott Forsyth