



Richard Nelson Coe

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Richard Coe, who died on 30th December, 1987, was Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Queensland from 1962 to 1963, Reader in French in the University of Melbourne between 1963 and 1965, and the incumbent of a Personal Chair, also in the University of Melbourne, from 1969 to 1972. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Humanities Research Council in 1963, and subsequently became a Foundation Member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

When Richard Coe's many friends and former colleagues and students see these dates, they are bound to be surprised, as his personal and intellectual influence far exceeded the impact one would normally associate with his less than eight years' residence on these shores, interrupted by his tenure of a Readership in the University of Warwick from 1966 to 1969. But then Richard Coe's links with this country outlived his years of physical presence here. His long-standing association with the *Australian Journal of French Studies* from its inception is just one example of that fidelity.

Richard Nelson Coe was born in Rustington (Sussex) on 27th October 1923. A member of a naval family (hence his second name, Nelson), he was educated at Repton School in Derbyshire, and with an interruption during the war (when he studied Bulgarian at the School of Slavonic Studies in the University of London and served with British Intelligence) he attended Oriol College, Oxford, from January 1942 to 1949 and graduated in French and Russian. He spent the 1949-50 academic year in Paris, studying 18th century French Political Philosophy. In 1954 he received his Ph.D. from the University of Leeds for a thesis on the 18th century political philosopher Morelly, which was subsequently (1961) published in German by Rütten and Loening in Berlin. This augured well of an international career which was to extend to three continents, and an international reputation which was to know no boundaries.

His teaching career began at the School of Slavonic Studies at the University of London where he taught Russian (intermittently from 1948). In 1950 he was appointed Assistant Lecturer and later Lecturer in French at the University of Leeds, under Stephen Ullman. This will be his longest period of service in any institution – he was to spend twelve years in Leeds. These were probably the most important years of his intellectual development when he defined the focus of his major scholarly preoccupations: the thought of the French Enlightenment, the life, work and aesthetics of Stendhal (with a special interest in the relationship of opera and literature), and the theatre of the Absurd. By the time he embarked for Australia in 1962, he had made major contributions to these three fields.

His first stay in Australia, between 1962 and 1965, included three years at the University of Melbourne, where he made an unusually strong impact on his colleagues and students. In 1966 Richard Coe returned to Britain to take up the exciting challenge of a Readership in the then new University of Warwick and,

with Professor Donald Charlton, help build one of the best French departments in that country. The call of Australia, however, remained strong – in the late 'sixties he was offered chairs in two Australian universities: in 1969 he decided to accept a Personal Chair at the University of Melbourne. In 1972 he once again returned to the UK for a second period at the University of Warwick, as Professor of French and Chairman of the Graduate School of Comparative Literature, this time for six years. In 1979, to everybody's surprise, this eternal traveller, this Flying Englishman was off to the University of California (Davis) where he was to spend the last eight years of his life.

A scholar of exceptional energy and a man of great vitality, Richard Coe had a personal and intellectual presence which no-one who came into contact with him could ignore or forget. He was a brilliant lecturer, in the full sense of the word: a lecturer-performer of great charisma (not unrelated to his passion for the theatre) and a most skilful organiser and presenter of solidly researched and intellectually demanding material. He was a *memorable* lecturer, worshipped by some and admired by all. Although a lover of Literature, Richard Coe always remained a philosopher, a scholar primarily interested in thought: his books on Ionesco, Beckett and Genet seek to explain literary creation from brilliant insights into the *ideas* which underlie it. He remained unaffected by intellectual or critical fashions – he neither espoused them nor fought them, he simply ignored them. This does not mean that he never changed or never grew: late in life, in an understandably reflective mood, he developed an interest in autobiographical writing, and his last major book, *When the Grass was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (Yale U.P., 1984) and a 100 page monograph on "Reminiscences of Childhood: An Approach to a Comparative Mythology" (*Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society*, 1984) marked a new focus in his thought and writings. The third part of this trilogy, his own autobiography, was left in manuscript form: we can only hope that it will be published posthumously.

Those who knew Richard Coe personally, will remember his wit, the sharpness of his mind, his vitality and his sense of fun. He will be missed not only by his family (his Australian wife, Ada, and their children, Laura, Terence and Dominic, and his grown-up children by his first marriage, Antonia and Andrew) but also by his many friends, disciples and readers in all parts of the world, not the least Australia.

Ivan Barko