



**Brian Elliott**

## BRIAN ROBINSON ELLIOTT

1910 - 1991

Brian Elliott was no relation of mine, but ever since we first met in the English Department at the University of Adelaide in 1959, we were known as the Elliott brothers. He used to get my mail; I got his bills. With characteristic playfulness he inscribed my copy of his *Marcus Clarke 'Specioso Fratri meo'*. We became colleagues, friends, indeed chosen brothers, and for my family he was always 'Uncle Brian'.

The affection Brian Elliott generated among his Adelaide colleagues and students and among his many friends in Australia and overseas is one of the measures of the man. Another is the respect for his single-minded devotion to the cause of Australian Studies at a time when nobody deemed Australian writing fit to be taught in our universities. He was, as has since been widely acknowledged, the pioneer who conferred respectability upon 'Aust. Lit' through his untiring advocacy, his teaching, and his own writings as scholar and critic.

A South Australian by birth and education, Brian Elliott chose to spend most of his life in Adelaide. His pride in his local ancestry is evident in the Foreword he wrote to the long 'Letter' written by his grandfather Joseph Elliott, which was published in 1984 as *Our Home in Australia. A Description of Cottage Life in 1860*. Here lies the beginnings of Brian Elliott's interest in his native land, its history, and its literature.

Educated at Unley High School and the University of Adelaide, he graduated in 1931 in English and French, then taught for several years at Adelaide and Unley High Schools before moving on to the University of Western Australia as a temporary assistant lecturer in 1939. Two years later he returned to Adelaide to join the staff of the English Department where he was to remain until his retirement in 1975. His quiet but pertinacious insistence on the propriety of including Australian literature among the courses offered by the Department eventually bore fruit and earned him the title of Lecturer in Australian Literature. With the support of Colin Horne, then Jury Professor of English Language and Literature, Brian Elliott was promoted Reader in Australian Literary Studies in 1961. But the Personal Chair which he so richly deserved was never to be his. Years later, on his retirement, the University of Adelaide finally honoured him by the award of the first of its new honorary degrees, Doctor of the University of Adelaide, and his achievements in the promotion of Australian Literature were recognised by Membership of the Order of Australia.

From his early articles in *Australian Quarterly* and *Meanjin* through numerous subsequent essays and reviews, Elliott's interest in Australian Literary Studies never flagged. His first book, on James

Hardy Vaux, appeared in 1944, and in 1947 he published several early pieces in *Singing to the Cattle and Other Australian Essays*, a volume now much prized by collectors of 'Australiana'. A selection of Australian short stories followed in 1948. Ten years later appeared *Marcus Clarke*, his still authoritative critical biography, published by the Clarendon Press. Probably the most important and original of his major works is *The Landscape of Australian Poetry* (1967), which received fitting recognition in the essays collected in *Mapped But Not Known*, the *festschrift* of essays and poems presented to Brian Elliott on his seventy-fifth birthday in 1985.

But he left his mark in other ways too. Although at first attracted to the Jindyworobak movement, he only briefly embraced its radical enthusiasm and was able many years later, in *The Jindyworobaks* (1979), to view it dispassionately as an exciting but passing phase. And it was Brian Elliott who first suspected the notorious Ern Malley affair as a clever hoax against Max Harris and his *Angry Penguins* in 1944.

During 1952 and 1953 Elliott travelled and lectured in North America and on his return was instrumental in founding the Australian Humanities Research Council, the predecessor of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, of which he became a Foundation Fellow and which he served from 1974 to 1976 as a member of Council. Other overseas visits followed, including a period as Leverhulme Fellow at the University of Singapore, during which he lectured on Australian writing while widening his knowledge of other languages and his interest in other literatures. One result was his translation of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *La Mythologie Primitive*, a study of the mythic world of Australian and Papuan natives (1983), and his translations of Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla* and José Zorilla y Moral's *Don Juan Tenorio*, neither of which, sadly, has been published.

These were labours of love, and his love of *letters* never left Brian Elliott throughout his long, active life. Devoted to serious critical scholarship, he also tried his hand at fiction - a novel, *Leviathan's Inch* (1946), set in South Australia, some short stories and occasional poems.

He had a great sense of fun and 'Uncle Brian' was a genial, ever welcoming host, lovingly supported by his wife Pat, and a stimulating, conscientious teacher to his generations of students.

Brian Elliott served Australia well. Thanks to his lifelong devotion, Australian Literary Studies are now firmly established in our universities. As A.D. Hope wrote in a poem addressed to Brian Elliott, 'But you, you led the van, my friend'.

Ralph Elliott