

## JOHN LEGGE AO

1921-2016

HONORARY FELLOW · ELECTED 2004



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John David Legge, who died in Melbourne on 4 February, just shy of his ninety-fifth birthday, was one of the towering Australian academics of the late twentieth century: a path-breaking scholar of Indonesia; a gifted teacher and supervisor; an institution-builder and an influential public intellectual.

John was born in the western Victorian town of Murchison, near Warnambool, where his father was the local Presbyterian minister. Unsurprisingly, he received a rather strict and religious upbringing and as a teenager considered following his father's vocation. Later, exposure to Leftist and libertine ideas at university caused him to question his Protestant faith; nevertheless his commitment to the Protestant moral code and its work ethic remained undiminished. Integrity, forthrightness and loyalty were his touchstones. He scorned idleness and craved activity. Only months before his death he was still swimming laps at the Prahran pool.

Thanks to the generosity of a local grazier, John was able to complete his schooling at Geelong College. Although not a brilliant student, he secured sufficient marks to enter the University of Melbourne and there, studying mainly history, he flourished. At that time the Melbourne History

Department was presided over by R. M. Crawford, one of the great founding fathers of the discipline in Australia. Crawford had an unusually strong interest in historiography. He firmly believed, as John later put it, 'that, as scientific explanation depended on underlying natural laws, so historians might discover laws of human behaviour and historical processes'. Initially a convert, later a staunch critic of these views, John resolved that interrogating historical method and understanding the nature of historical inquiry would be central to his own practice, and this carried over into his teaching as well. For years Collingwood's *The Idea of History* was required reading for the honours class at Monash University. But, meanwhile, other concerns intervened. In his second year, following Japan's entry into the Second World War, students at Melbourne were drafted into a reserve military unit and given basic training. Upon graduating, John joined, at Crawford's recommendation, the Army's Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs, an intelligence-gathering outfit focused on New Guinea. In 1944 he was posted to Papua, a transforming experience. After 1945, a stint at the School of Civil Affairs in Canberra, saw him grooming administrators for the post-war reconstruction of Australia's northern colony. Then an appointment in the History Department of the University of Western Australia in Perth gave him an opportunity to pursue his burgeoning interest in Papua in an academic context. The direction of his research shifted when he received a scholarship from the Australian National University which took him to Oxford. There he wrote a DPhil thesis on the first British governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, subsequently published as *Britain in Fiji, 1858-1880* (Macmillan, 1958). It shifted again after his return to Perth when he made a 'sharp decision to change course, and to switch my focus from the Pacific to South-East Asia'. He set himself to learn Bahasa Indonesia and, with the aid of a Carnegie bequest, went to study with George Kahin at Cornell University. Fieldwork followed, which morphed into a book about newly independent Indonesia's experiments with regional and local administration. In 1960 he moved back to Victoria to become the foundation Chair of History at Monash, the very first staff appointee at the university. From 1977 until his retirement in 1986, he was Monash's Dean of Arts.

John's decision to become an Indonesia specialist was partly pragmatic, born out of a desire to consolidate his career; but increasingly, especially after spending

a semester in-country, this was supplanted by a sense of mission, grounded in the conviction that Indonesia, and post-colonial Asia generally, were complex and fascinating places of growing international importance which Australia desperately needed to know more about. In furtherance of this aim, he spent the early 1960s writing a short introduction to Indonesia for a generalist academic audience. When it came out in 1964, the book was highly praised for its balance, fairness and expository skill. Nicholas Tarling, for example, thought it a 'masterly essay' which contained 'as it were within itself, the courteous exchange of tutorial and seminar'. Oliver Wolters, while acknowledging the attachment of the historian John to events and turning points, commended him for his dialogue in the book with the work of anthropologists and other social scientists. The American luminary Clifford Geertz once told Tony Milner that he believed it was owing to John's short history, above all, that modern Indonesian studies had acquired its characteristic multidisciplinary aspect. Other monographs followed: *Intellectuals and Nationalism in Indonesia* (Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1988), a study of the Leftist circle around Sultan Sjahrir, and the book John is today best known for, a detailed and empathetic political biography of the country's founding leader, *Sukarno: A Political Biography* (Allen Lane, 1972). These latter offerings were also well received.

Nevertheless, John's contribution to Asian Studies in this country went well beyond his research output as an academic. Upon his appointment to Monash, John urged the founding Vice-Chancellor, Louis Matheson, to make the university a world centre of Asian Studies. Matheson was won over. Legge was given leave to introduce a raft of Asia-linked courses and to appoint research-qualified staff to teach them. Initially he hired mainly Southeast Asianists – Herb Feith, Jamie Mackie, Cyril Skinner, Michael Swift, Ian Mabbett and Milton Osborne – but later widened the net to embrace other areas such as China and India. Peter Clarke and Gwendda Milston (and later Lincoln Li) were hired to look after East Asia, and I was given responsibility for India. As a specialist on the British Raj, with a newly-completed doctorate from Oxford, I neatly fitted into John's blueprint. Over the next fifteen years we were joined, progressively, by Mike Godley, David Chandler, Merle Ricklefs and Jane Drakard. Meanwhile the University's growing Southeast Asian strength was consolidated with the setting up of a centre, modelled on the one John had been associated with at Cornell, to coordinate graduate supervision and the dissemination of research findings on the region across departments. But John's advocacy for a greater Australian engagement with Asia was not confined to Monash University. He trumpeted his message in opinion pieces in the newspapers; used an appointment to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board

to disseminate it to teachers; and personally argued its merits in public forums such as the Australian Institute of International Affairs. Along with Elaine McKay and others, he helped establish, in the mid-1970s, a countrywide Asian Studies Association in a bid to reach out to government. McKay maintains that it was John, preeminently, who put Asian Studies on the Australian academic map.

John succeeded in part because he was determined, and in part because he charmed people with his directness, his willingness to listen to other points of view, and his infectious laugh. He was knowledgeable about all manner of subjects. He could quote at length from Shakespeare and Christian scripture. He liked a drink and a joke. Oliver Wolters was impressed by John's 'delight in spirited argument, his occasional chuckles'. When Selo Soemardjan met John in Djakarta in the early fifties, he thought him 'a man without problems and inhibitions in making friends with others through his broad smiles'. My first impressions were similar. When I joined the Monash History Department in June 1970 John was away on sabbatical. He'd gone to Singapore to head up a new institute there. The following year he was back and head of department, so our paths crossed frequently. At first I was a bit in awe of him, but he quickly put me at my ease, in part by letting it slip that it was he who had ticked my application, albeit *in absentia*. When the football season started he let it be known that he followed St Kilda and asked me who I was barracking for. I said, 'Carlton'. He winced. The previous year we'd won the flag. Robust conversations ensued, particularly on Mondays. Yet he was still a professor and my immediate boss, and that mattered in those days when professors really ruled the roost. Fortunately, ours were benevolent dictators. On the other hand junior lecturers were left very much more to their own devices than is now the case. There were no regular performance management meetings and definitely no student surveys. This was good in some ways but not so good in the sense that it was left to the professors to offer their staff advice about career development. I was lucky. Perhaps because our fields of research overlapped a bit, John took it upon himself to keep an eye on my progress. One morning, I was sitting in the staff room reading through a book review I had just written. John sat down beside me and I showed him the review. 'Very nice', he remarked, 'but it's about time you wrote one of your own'. The riposte was accompanied, characteristically, with a grin, but it struck home. Immersed in teaching and curriculum development, I'd been neglecting my research. The next day I started work on transforming my Oxford thesis into a manuscript fit for publication.

John administered the school, and later the Faculty, with the same aplomb. The late 1960s and early 1970s at Monash were years of intense student activism, mainly centred on Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War.

John shared the students' scepticism, and aired his views openly at the 'teach-ins' that were being held in the old union building (now Campus Centre). This made him a popular figure. But when some of the radicals ventured to critique the way we were running things in History – in particular, taking aim at the 'concept of failure' – John as Head of Department slapped them down, telling a delegation of honours students that he was willing not to grade them but only at the price of not writing them references for scholarships. Resistance evaporated.

Deservedly, John picked up numerous accolades across the years. He was elected to Fellowship of the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences, and subsequently made an Honorary Fellow by the Australian Academy of the Humanities. In 1988 he was appointed an Officer in the Order of Australia. About the same time, colleagues in the Southeast Asia field gifted him with a *festschrift*. I suspect, though, that at the end of the day, these honours meant less to John than the personal friendships he had forged during his glittering career. I've already spoken of John's generosity towards his colleagues – he was even

more solicitous towards students. John inspired countless undergraduate students to pursue Asian Studies further, and over the years literally dozens duly found their way into teaching positions at Australian and overseas universities. Bob Elson, who wrote a PhD thesis on Java at Monash under John's supervision, believes that he was the best academic communicator he ever encountered, citing as among his great attributes, a fastidious attention to factual detail and the nuts-and-bolts of writing.

Into his nineties John still regularly attended seminars hosted by our department and by the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies. For many years after his retirement, his advice continued to be sought by successive deans and vice-chancellors. Even as two nasty falls took their toll of his body, his mind remained keen and engaged.

It is splendid that the Monash University Arts Faculty has recently named a student study space in the Menzies Building in John Legge's memory. He will be greatly missed.

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