



Photograph courtesy M C MacDonagh

Oliver MacDonagh
(1924 - 2002)

Oliver MacDonagh, one of the most creative historians of his generation, died in Sydney on 22 May 2002, aged 77. He had been Professor of History in the Research School of Social Sciences in the Australian National University between 1973 and 1990. Born in Ireland, he held degrees from University College Dublin and Cambridge. He had also been admitted to the Irish Bar. MacDonagh was Fellow and Honorary Fellow of St Catherine's College Cambridge. Before coming to Australia with his wife Carmel and their young family, he was Professor of Modern History at University College, Cork. In Australia he helped design Flinders University and became Foundation Professor of History.

He was a quietly formidable independent thinker, immensely learned with instant recall, armed with a quick but gentle wit. Everything he wrote was original, powerful and elegant. His *Pattern of Government Growth* [1961] on the British Passenger Acts of the nineteenth century, imposed to make sea travel less hazardous, immediately displayed a main gift of great historians—the distinctive vision and passion to take what might seem at first sight to be a smallish subject and recreate it as a searing piece of human experience and a major illumination on public policy-making. This first of MacDonagh's books launched a new understanding of the growth of government bureaucracy, driven by public outrage at an abuse newly perceived as intolerable and internal administrative ambitions to make controls effective. *Government Growth* inspired shelves of studies of similar developments in Europe and North America. His study of the reformer, Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick, pioneered investigations of late eighteenth century social policy. MacDonagh's *States of Mind* [1985], a short study of modern Irish history, remains remarkable for its ecumenical handling of the island's troubled sectarian past and Irish-British relations. It won the Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize. His life of Daniel O'Connell was a landmark in Irish biographical writing: myths were both accounted for and disposed of, and 'The Liberator' and his wife emerged as human beings more flamboyant, charming and politically effective than ever in their Romantic ambience. *The Sharing of the Green: A Modern Irish History for Australians* [1996] sought to emancipate Australians – and Americans – from the destructive tribal myths preserved among their families and in school texts. MacDonagh also wrote one of the best books about Jane Austen and a volume in the history of Guinness, the frankness of which upset the company. He also wrote good poetry and his public readings of Seamus Heaney, Yeats – which he knew by heart – and James Joyce on Bloomsday are unforgettable. He

loved rugby – especially Irish – and wrote eloquently, if wistfully, about that, too.

Oliver MacDonagh was a very private, devout Catholic, although sometimes dismayed by the doings of the Vatican. He was a splendid teacher, especially good with graduate students, several of whom now hold chairs around the world. With his colleague in the History Department, RISS, Ken Inglis — a magnificent duo — MacDonagh enriched the Australian Bicentennial with the 11 volume *Australians—An historical library*. The concept was highly original: five volumes devoted to the history of Australia from the Ice-Age to the present, told (after the European invasion) in one year ‘slices’ at 50 year intervals, and the six other volumes devoted to historical statistics, dates, historical geography, and maps and bibliographies. The set remains a fundamental source and authority for Australian History around the world. Rare for any such undertaking, the nine-year job was completed on time, partly because it was entrusted, rarely again, to young contributors.

His major contributions to scholarship brought MacDonagh election to four national academies, the British, the Royal Irish, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences, in which he served as a senior office bearer.

Oliver is survived by Carmel and their seven children, and grandchildren.

F B Smith