



John Davis McCaughey
(1914–2005)

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John Davis McCaughey was born in Belfast on 12 July 1914 into a prominent Ulster Presbyterian family. He was educated at Campbell College in Belfast and then Cambridge, where he read English literature, and subsequently studied theology in Edinburgh and Belfast. In 1940, he married Jean Henderson, who was studying medicine at Queen's University in Belfast. Following ordination in 1942, he performed wartime service with the YMCA and, from 1946 to 1952, worked for the Student Christian Movement.

Jean, Davis and their five children arrived in Melbourne in 1953 following his appointment as Professor of New Testament Studies in the Theological Hall of the Presbyterian Church attached to Ormond College at the University of Melbourne. His Christian faith was ecumenical and informed by the theological studies of Barth, Niebuhr and Bonhoeffer; in his teaching, he placed particular stress on the literary qualities and imaginative power of the gospels. A doctorate of divinity was conferred on him by the University of Edinburgh.

In 1959, Davis McCaughey became Master of Ormond College and, although he continued to teach in Theological Hall, the College absorbed his principal energies for the next two decades. With its imposing nineteenth-century building, Ormond was then dominated by undergraduates drawn from Melbourne's leading private schools and studying for the professions; it carried over much of the atmosphere of the boarding house. Davis McCaughey embarked on a remarkable renovation. In the space of a decade, three major building projects doubled the student numbers and provided for a library, a chapel and accommodation for postgraduates and resident tutors.

He inherited from his predecessor, Brinley Newton-John, a new Master's Lodge, stylish but impractical, and the appointment of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd as college architects made for strikingly modern new buildings. The building program was assisted by federal and state government grants in a period of educational expansion, but relied on donations as well as the Council's willingness to stretch finances to the utmost. Here Davis displayed a rare talent for enlisting the support of busy, influential and impeccably respectable former students in his enthusiasm for a liberal education.

The portrait of McCaughey by Fred Williams that hangs in Ormond's dining hall catches an aspect of his personality. It paints him full length but side on, leaning forward, shrewd and alert; there is even a suggestion of wiliness. This, it suggests, is a man thinking several moves ahead. These qualities were demonstrated as he handled the relations with the Presbyterian Church over such vexed issues as alcohol in the college and visiting hours for female guests.

He wanted to create a more various and adult educational community, and secured it by broadening the intake, building the numbers of tutors and visiting academics, and eventually, in 1973, by securing the admission of women. With these changes came an enrichment of college life, which extended to the appreciation of theatre, art and music—the three creative forms practised by his sons James, Patrick and John—just as his daughters Mary and Bridget renewed his own vocation of teaching.

One of his sharp insights was that those two apparent antonyms, tradition and dissent, are inseparable. As he recalled, the faith that he inherited was that of *ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda*—a church reformed and always to be reformed. During the tumultuous dissent of the late 1960s, and the overreaction it provoked, Davis McCaughey welcomed dissent but encouraged its expression in ways that allowed for further discussion.

He understood collegial life as a shared, continuing discussion on the basis of mutual respect, and that conviction informed his growing role in the University during the 1970s. He was the foundation chair of the University Assembly, a forum created in the aftermath of major confrontations between students and the Melbourne administration in 1971, and later served as Deputy Chancellor. Earlier, as a member of its interim council, he had helped shape La Trobe University. His advice on educational matters was frequently sought, and his contribution recognised with honorary degrees from La Trobe, Melbourne and Queen's University, Belfast.

Throughout this period of academic administration, Davis McCaughey maintained a close involvement in church affairs, always in an ecumenical spirit. When the Jesuit Theological College moved from Sydney to Melbourne in 1969, and the Order sought assistance from Ormond, a joint theological library was established; and from the growing cooperation of the Jesuit Theological College and its counterparts at Ormond, Queens and Trinity, a United Faculty of Theology emerged. In 1977, he became the inaugural President of the Uniting Church, and rightly so since it was his ecumenical faith that made possible the union of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches, and his pen that formulated most of its foundational document, the Basis of Union.

A member of both the Melbourne Club and the Royal Melbourne Golf Club, Davis McCaughey's early stands on matters of conscience (such as his public criticism of hanging in 1962) were overshadowed by the prominent and eloquent criticism of the dismissal of the Whitlam ministry in 1975. He did not seek attention but it

increasingly followed him as the striking independence of his thought and eloquence of his expression attracted wider attention.

As Victoria's State Governor from 1986 to 1992, he won respect for his warmth, dignity and scrupulous integrity. He and Jean opened the doors of Government House to the public, for the first time. Military aides gave way to civilian ones as they dispensed with austere formality that put a distance between the position and the people. He took a keen interest in the changing circumstances of the vice-regal role, and a history of Victoria's nineteenth-century governors appeared in 1993 as well as other explorations of the role of the Crown in Australia. He also delivered the Boyer lectures in 1988. Further publications followed. A collection of his essays, occasional addresses and eulogies was aptly named *Tradition and Dissent* (1997), and demonstrates his particular interest in liberal education and medical ethics. His principal theological essays, along with some sermons and commemorative addresses, were published as *Fresh Words and Deeds* (2004). All of these writings are marked by rigour, breadth and grace.

His election to an honorary fellowship of the Academy in 1990 was a fitting recognition of a scholar who enriched public life and a teacher who imparted his own love of learning to generations of students.

Stuart Macintyre