

WILLIAM STANLEY RAMSON

1933-2011

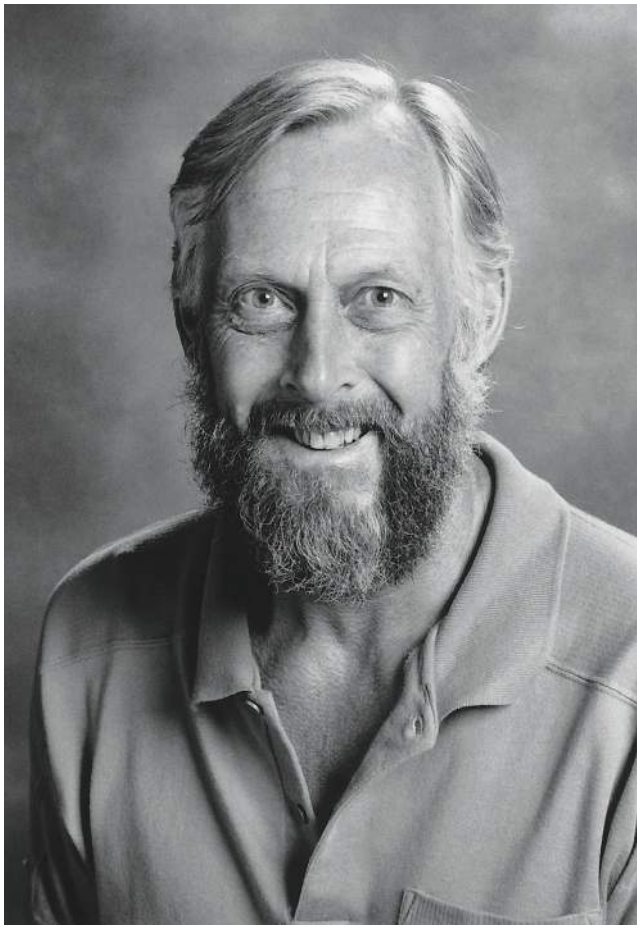


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BILL Ramson, future editor of the monumental *Australian National Dictionary*, was born in Lower Hutt, New Zealand, on 4 December 1933. The eldest of four children, he attended the Hutt Valley High School, where his father taught, before going on to study for a Master of Arts degree at Victoria University, Wellington. His passion for philological and late mediaeval study was kindled by his Edinburgh-born Professor of English, Ian Gordon, an inspirational mentor to successive generations of students at Victoria. Several of Gordon's more enterprising pupils

would choose eventually to leave Wellington and work in other parts of the world, as Bill himself was to do, though all were to retain a strong affection for the institution at which they'd first been trained. They included Robert Burchfield, who settled in Oxford as Fellow of St Peter's College and became in due course an editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*; Grahame Johnston and George Turner, who moved to Australia and produced by turns the first two editions of the *Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Australian English*; George Russell, later Bill's mediaeval colleague and Head of Department at the Australian National University; and Bill's close contemporary at Victoria, D. F. McKenzie, who was later to exchange his chair at Victoria University for a Readership (later a Professorship) of Bibliography and Textual Studies at Oxford. After graduating in 1954 Bill elected likewise to leave New Zealand, moving to Australia and enrolling as the first-ever doctoral student in the Department of English at the University of Sydney. Here he worked on the historical evolution of the Australian vocabulary under the supervision of A. G. Mitchell, the country's leading authority on the pronunciation of Australian English. In 1963 he completed his dissertation, which was published three years later as *Australian English: An Historical Study of the Vocabulary 1788-1898*.

By that time Bill and his first wife, Belinda, who he had married in Lower Hutt in 1956, were well settled in Canberra, together with their three daughters, Mary, Catherine, and Jennifer. Bill had been appointed in 1961 to a lectureship in A. D. Hope's Department of English, a small but lively oasis of scholarship and conviviality at that time in the still somewhat austere national capital. Teaching a variety of undergraduate courses on literature of the late mediaeval period, Bill developed a particular interest in Scottish court poetry of the early Renaissance. In 1967 he spent a period of leave as a Nuffield Foundation Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, studying the late sixteenth-century Bannatyne manuscript of court poetry held in the National Library of Scotland. This work laid the foundation for his later critical anthology of Scottish poetry from the reign of James III to that of James VI and I, *The Poetry of the Stewart Court* (1982), a book he co-

authored with Joan Hughes, his former research assistant who was by then his domestic as well as his scholarly partner.

Bill was greatly attracted by Edinburgh, a city to which he returned in 1972-3, this time as a Fellow in the University's Institute of Advanced Studies. He developed many close friendships at this time with writers in and around Edinburgh, including John MacQueen, Professor of Scottish Literature and Oral Tradition and Director of the School of Scottish Studies, the folklorist Emily Lyle, and the poet Iain Crichton Smith, all of whom he later contrived to bring on highly successful visits to Australia. And in the School of Scottish Studies he came upon a remarkable archive that was to affect the future direction of his own work: the still-uncompleted files of *The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*. This huge lexicographical project had been started in the early 1930s by Sir William Craigie, one of the original editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and would eventually reach its conclusion, as a mighty twelve-volume work, more than eighty years later, in 2002. As one sort of model as to how dictionaries may be built—laboriously, over many decades, by numerous successive editors—*The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* must have seemed to Bill both inspiring and dismaying. Dictionary-making, as the project's then-editor, Jack Aitken, enjoyed reminding him, was an exceedingly slow business, the editorial labour being likely to take three times as long as that of the basic collecting. But like Samuel Johnson sardonically reviewing the glacial progress of the French Academy's team-driven dictionary of the French language, Bill must have felt that—in the case at least of Australian English—these tasks, though laborious, could surely be done more swiftly. Australian English was at least not an 'older tongue', and its history, in comparison with that of the Scots language, was relatively brief. Though the general character of the language spoken by white settlers in Australia had been vividly described by scholars such as Sidney Baker and G. A. Wilkes, its lexicon had never been fully collected, nor had its evolution been systematically linked to historical and local circumstance. The possibility of preparing a comprehensive dictionary of Australian English on historical principles—a project to which the Australian Academy of the Humanities had pledged its commitment and support soon after its establishment in 1969—must have seemed to Bill, as it did to others in Australia, a deeply attractive prospect, though one fraught with logistical, procedural, and financial difficulty.

By the early 1970s various lexicographical projects were mooted or under way in Australia. At Duntroon, Grahame Johnston was adapting the smallest of the Oxford dictionaries for Australian usage, while at Macquarie University Arthur Delbridge was preparing a more 'aggressively Australian' general reference dictionary for publication by Jacaranda Press. Delbridge persuaded Bill

Ramson, along with David Blair and John Bernard, to join his editorial team, who worked cheerfully together for four years before a change of management at Jacaranda temporarily diverted the project (which was eventually to emerge years later as *The Macquarie Dictionary of Australian English*). Bill left the Jacaranda team at this moment to develop his own more ambitious plans for a historically-based dictionary of Australian English in the style of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Such a large scholarly undertaking might most effectively be based, so Bill believed, at the Australian National University, with ready access to the resources of the Research Schools, the National Library of Australia, and other major institutional archives. Members of Sydney University's Australian Language Research Centre, on the other hand, urged that such a work would be more profitably pursued in a larger city such as Sydney, where it could draw on the resources of several universities. To further complicate the picture, Peter Davies—an English publisher who'd been brought to Australia originally to advise on the Jacaranda project—was now at the ANU's Humanities Research Centre (HRC) promoting the attractions of yet another kind of dictionary of Australian English: one that embraced the regional variations that his researches, contrary to received wisdom, were beginning to reveal. In the Atherton tablelands, Davies observed, forestry workers didn't *fell* timber as their counterparts did in the southern states, but instead would speak of *falling* it. Hundreds of similar instances of small regional lexical variations, he was convinced, could be found by researchers with the time, energy, and resources to pursue them.

The larger story of these competing enterprises, and of his own ultimate success in obtaining institutional support and funding for *The Australian National Dictionary*, is told in part in Bill Ramson's *Lexical Images* (2002), yet the basic factors leading his success are not wholly revealed in this account. From 1975 until 1981 Bill served as Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the ANU, and thus on a whole range of committees across the university. He was a remarkably effective and well-liked Dean: always ready to listen and to negotiate, always generous with his time, always quick to spot a creative opportunity. As Chairman for several years of the HRC's Steering and Advisory Committees, he immersed himself characteristically in the work of the Centre, convening two conferences on subjects close to his heart: *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1978) and *South Wind: Interactions in the Arts in Renaissance Europe* (1983). Through his various administrative roles he learnt moreover how even the largest and seemingly immobilised research projects can be helped forward through modest adjustments of schedules and of budgets: through a term's relief from teaching, or a small grant massaged out of some neglected fund, or the strategic

redeployment of an under-employed research assistant.

By the late 1970s Bill was impatient to return to his own scholarly work, sharply conscious of a looming anniversary by which his own much dreamed-of dictionary of Australian English might appropriately be delivered: the bicentenary in 1988 of the arrival of the first white settlers in Australia. In 1978, a bare ten years before this crucial date, he took off on a whirlwind trip to centres in Strasbourg, Oxford, and Vancouver to finalise his plan of attack. He still had another three years to run on his Deanship, but if the project were ever to be realised it had to begin at once. By the end of that year he had gathered together sufficient funding to employ a couple of research assistants in the Department of English to work alongside Joan Hughes, his trusted ally and co-designer of the project, who would oversee day-to-day progress on the dictionary. His strategy was strictly pragmatic. Regional variations would not be on the agenda. There were no funds available to pursue such an elusive quarry, and no time to spare on what might well prove ultimately to be a quite minimal return.

Released from other distracting duties in 1981, Bill was at last free to work full-time with Joan and other members of his small editorial team who were now busily assembling the materials for the new dictionary. The routines the team followed in the Kingsley Street Cottage on the edge of the ANU campus, their headquarters from the mid-1980s, did not differ much from those which Sir James Murray had devised a century or so earlier for work in his famous Scriptorium in the garden of his house in north Oxford. Sceptical of the value of digitisation and wary of its cost, Bill believed, like Murray, in the usefulness of file cards or 'slips', on which historical citations illustrative of linguistic usage were written out carefully by hand by researchers working in the National Library and by volunteers throughout the country. One of these volunteers, the legendary Chris Collier of Brisbane, was to send in a grand total of over 100,000 quotations over the life of the project, at an average rate of 250 quotations a month, culled from his daily reading of the *Courier-Mail*. His cards would arrive, as the present Director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre has recently testified (Sarah Ogilvie, *Australian Book Review*, June

2012), eccentrically wrapped in old cornflake boxes 'with bits of dog hair and cereal stuck to them'. Those entering the Kingsley Street Cottage needed at times to step their way warily through a wide scatter of meticulously arranged file-cards over which the Associate Editor, cross-legged on the floor, was thoughtfully brooding. Bill's decision to work manually rather than electronically with these citations was controversial at the time and may seem even more questionable in retrospect, but was thoroughly vindicated by the speed and efficiency with which the dictionary was actually put together, and published triumphantly to scholarly acclaim in the bicentenary year.

The Kingsley Street Cottage had become during the 1980s a famously welcoming place, where coffee and cake were reliably to be found, and where at the close of the day you might hear the satisfying sound of a well-drawn cork and a buzz of vigorous talk about bingles or barnies or bludgers or bundies. Bill and his Dictionary had friends from many corners of the ANU who enjoyed dropping in, and others who worked freely and regularly for him, advising on the quality of particular entries. Amongst the most active of his supporters were the Australian historians, who were quick to realise the extraordinary research potential of the vast bank of citations amassed within the Cottage's archives. Bill's skills in negotiation had been further proven by arrangements he deftly engineered between the ANU and Oxford University Press (Australia), whereby the publishers agreed to support not only the principal dictionary, but the establishment of an Australian National Dictionary Centre at ANU, committed to producing a continuing series of revised and derivative Oxford dictionaries and language publications. Bill served as the first Director of this (still flourishing) Centre from 1987 to 1994.

Bill and Joan were married in 1991. The early onset of Parkinson's disease made Bill's final years unusually arduous both for him and for his devoted wife, yet he maintained a keen and affectionate interest in scholarly matters and in the lives of all his friends. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1989, and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, by the ANU in 1996. He died on 5 October 2011.

- IAN DONALDSON