

George William Turner (1921–2003)

George Turner was truly a distinguished scholar, an inspiring teacher, and all who knew him as friend and colleague could not help being drawn to this generous, warm-hearted New Zealander. His death, on 23 September 2003 in an Adelaide nursing home, brought to an end a long illness after a life devoted to the study of the English language in all its richness and regional resourcefulness. George was 81 and is survived by his caring wife Beryl and their sons Eric and Neil and their families.

George was born on 26 October 1921 at Dannevirke in New Zealand's North Island, a name identical with the Old Icelandic Danavirki, "the Danish wall", presumably bestowed by one of those pockets of Danish settlers found in New Zealand and suitably prophetic of George's future involvement with the Old Norse language: witness his first scholarly article on the Old Norse vowel system in the prestigious *Arkiv for Nordisk Filologi* in 1959. He attended the local High School before graduating Master of Arts in 1948 at the University of New Zealand. He began his career as a librarian at Christchurch in 1949. Here he wrote *German for Librarians*, which was eventually revised and published by Massey University Press in 1972.

In 1955 George Turner was invited to join the English Department at the University of Canterbury. Here he taught until 1963, during which time he published several articles indicative of his future concentration on English phonetics, etymology, and regional varieties, as well as on some literary topics. He then undertook postgraduate studies at University College, London, and gained the Diploma in English Linguistic Studies as well as the Certificate in Phonetics.

George was appointed Senior Lecturer, then Reader, in English at the University of Adelaide in 1965, with special responsibility for English Language and Medieval Literature. Here he joined a lively, congenial department under the wise and humane guidance of the Jury Professor, Colin Horne. Five members of this department were elected Fellows of the Academy, Colin Horne in 1972, George Turner in 1974. His election to the AAH was an honour that he particularly cherished.

George's first major work, *The English Language – Australia and New Zealand*, appeared in Longman's English Language Series in 1966, a second revised edition following in 1973. In his Foreword the general editor of the series, Randolph Quirk, referred to what was to prove a major characteristic of George Turner's writings: "[a]n English made especially readable by a delicious wit and dry, economical irony."

Topics that were often forbiddingly technical become readily intelligible in George's own lucid style, yet he succeeded throughout in remaining a meticulous scholar, erudite without ponderousness. Thus he turns as readily to the Old Norse *Hávamál* to explain the phrase "it gives me the willies" as to the Sydney area Aboriginal *wolaba* to explain "wallaby".

A particularly memorable example of George Turner's painstaking scholarship are his annotations to the Australian classic, *Such is Life*, at which he had been "quietly beavering away" for years, according to his wife, before being joined by a team of colleagues in 1974 to produce the Annotated Edition of the novel, published by Oxford University Press in 1991 and by the Halsted Press in 1999 where the annotations amount to a third of the total number of pages.

But it is probably in his editions of several Australian Oxford Dictionaries that George Turner's etymological as well as other linguistic skills found their fullest scope. After producing his *Stylistics* for Penguin Books in 1973, repeatedly reprinted, and translated into Japanese in 1985, George edited the 2nd edition of *The Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* in 1984 and *The Australian Little Oxford Dictionary* in 1987. The same year saw the publication of *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, a more massive volume of 1340 pages, to be followed two years later by *The Australian Oxford Paperback Dictionary*, edited jointly by George and his wife Beryl. Although this dictionary is based on an earlier English edition, the editors assure the reader that "all entries have been reconsidered with an Australian relevance in mind and many Australian items have been added. The pronunciation has been entirely revised to record educated Australian usage", and where appropriate the *lad* from *Dannevirke* has added New Zealand usage. The same line-by-line revision was applied to *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, based on the 7th English edition of 1982.

At the same time George published a considerable number of scholarly pamphlets, articles, notes and reviews, which again illustrated the range of his interests, including such titles as 'The Verses in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*' and 'Towards a Theory of Lexicography'.

In 1988 a *festschrift*, edited by TL and Jill Burton, was published in George's honour by DS Brewer, Cambridge, contributions coming from all over Australia and New Zealand, even from as far away as Zagreb, while the *Tabula Gratulatoria* of 115 names includes scholars from Vanuatu, Freiburg, Oxford, Lund, Varanasi, Himeji, and Alice Springs. The *festschrift* opens with a fitting 'Tribute to an Ambivert' from Professor Ian Reid, recalling the latter's student days at the University

of Canterbury in the 1960s when George Turner was his teacher, and when later he arrived for postgraduate study at Adelaide and was met again by the 'genial smile of mymentor'. An honour which George greatly appreciated was his appointment as Honorary Visiting Research Fellow in the English Department of the University of Adelaide in 1990. Here he was able to continue for a while his scholarly pursuits until ill health intervened. And that is how we remember George, tireless in his research, welcoming friends, colleagues, students with his genial smile. For George Turner was indeed, as the poet of Beowulf proclaimed in the final words of that poem more than a thousand years ago, manna mildust ond monthwaerust, "mildest of men and the most gentle".

Ralph Elliott