John Oastler Ward FAHA

1940 - 2023

John Oastler Ward was a scholar, humanist, and educator such as we no longer find. His interests and enthusiasms were so rich and wide, that they are hard to pin down. Whether he was talking about transformations of classical rhetoric in medieval and renaissance traditions, heresy and historiography, music (above all opera), or steam trains, he always found much to explore and share with others. Any single label does not do justice to the passion which he devoted to so many different subjects.

Born in Melbourne, he pursued undergraduate studies in History at the University of Melbourne, notably under Marion (Mollie) Gibbs. In 1963, he went to Toronto to pursue doctoral studies in medieval rhetoric under the supervision of J. Reginald O'Donnell and Nicholas Häring, who introduced him to the rich and exhaustive philological tradition practised at the Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, rooted in familiarity with both medieval manuscripts and textual scholarship. The thesis that he submitted to the Institute in 1972 was legendary for its length (well over two thousand pages).

His chosen field of study, that of the tradition of commentary on Ciceronian rhetoric across the medieval period, became one of the most frequently cited unpublished doctoral theses in medieval scholarship: 'Artificiosa eloquentia in the Middle Ages: a study of Cicero's De inventione, The Ad Herennium and Quintilian's De Institutione oratoria from the early Middle Ages to the thirteenth century, with special reference to the Schools of Northern France'. While he distilled some of that knowledge in Ciceronian Rhetoric in Treatise, Scholion and Commentary (Turnhout:

Brepols, 1995), only in 2019 did he publish an expanded version of his doctoral research, as Classical Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: The Medieval Rhetors and Their Art 400-1300, with Manuscript Survey to 1500 CE, (Leiden: Brill, 2019). It is a tribute to his gift for friendship and unstinting generosity that he shared so much of his learning with others, in true medieval fashion.

Ward's research, first undertaken in the 1960s and expanded upon over the next five decades and more, was important because it challenged a conventional assumption that medieval intellectual life was dominated by dialectic, and that the art of rhetoric was not recovered until the renaissance. John's dogged enthusiasm for the transmission and development of rhetorical theory demonstrated the flawed and facile nature of such assumptions.

Above all, his gift was to show how much medieval culture, whether Latin or vernacular, rested not just on Aristotelian logic, but on Cicero's understanding of the ethical obligations of the orator, to serve the common good. Ward developed a particular sense of kinship with twelfth-century intellectuals like Thierry of Chartres and John of Salisbury, precisely because their interests ranged so widely between the pursuit of ideas and the demands of public life. One of his many projects, unfortunately left incomplete at his death, involved creating a critical edition of the commentaries of William of Champeaux on rhetoric. He also devoted much attention to the humanist orator, Pier Paulo Vergerio, perhaps because of a similar awareness of the connection between public speaking, education, and civic responsibility.

Ward first obtained a lectureship at the Department of History, at the University of Sydney, in 1967, before his doctoral thesis was officially submitted. Between then and his retirement in 2003, Ward's lectures in medieval history became legendary for their learning and passion, stirring a significant number of disciples to pursue further graduate research (or in the case of Cathy Jinks), creative fiction rooted in familiarity with the medieval world. But one important part of his influence was his commitment to a Latin reading group, in which he could continue the very process that he was engaged in studying, that of teasing out difficult texts,

working out their meaning and implications both for a past world and the present. John's enthusiasm for such study often by-passed conventional structures. He was not interested in advancing through the political byways of academic life.

Such was his commitment to public life that between 1977 and 1991 he served as Councillor in the municipality of Ashfield, becoming its mayor between 1991 and 1995. In many ways, Ward was putting into practice the rhetorical and ethical ideals so dear to Cicero and his many admirers across the centuries. One could argue that such commitments limited his opportunities to publish his research. Yet he still produced a remarkable range of papers, many delivered at international conferences where he could share his research with friends. He also produced a very large number of book reviews, each a testament to the breadth of his learning.

So much more could be said about his generosity to others, both here in Australia and internationally. It was amply experienced by those who had the privilege of knowing him in person, and of sharing in the hospitality of John and Gail in their residence at 23 Kensington Rd, Summer Hill. For them, as also for those who might visit Sydney only occasionally, their home and family life provided a haven of sanity, conversation, and belonging. John enjoyed life to the maximum, even when his health gave cause for concern. He loved travelling on steam trains around the world. His commitment was always to public transport, as something that should be valued. In his later life, failing health and eyesight became major challenges. Yet a love of music, above all of the operas of Mozart, remained with him to the end. He provided for his many students and friends, from all works of life, a model of how generosity, enthusiasm, and scholarship can work together for the greater good.

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