

# Obituary

JAMES JOHNSTON AUCHMUTY



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With the death of James Johnston Auchmuty in the United States on 15 October 1981, the Academy has lost one of its Foundation Fellows who was deeply involved in the early work of establishing the Australian Humanities Research Council, of which he was chairman from 1962-5. He was able to blend his humane scholarship with a fine aptitude for administration, and never forgot, in the midst of the practical politics involved in creating a new university, that he was a historian. To the establishment of the University of Newcastle, of which he was the first Vice-Chancellor and Principal from 1965 to 1974, he brought many gifts, not least his vision, his understanding of what makes of a university more than a degree-giving body. He saw the need to extend and conserve knowledge, and realized that the university's library, therefore, was the heart of it all; it is now rightly named after him. But knowledge should breed discussion; tradition should aid the continuous life of thought, the agreement and disagreement in argument which he enjoyed so much and to which he brought such a well-stocked and nimbly ready mind. And so he insisted upon the new University having a regard for its physical appearance, for spaciousness and ceremonial, for hospitality and the proper conduct of business.

Auchmuty wanted about him a body of scholars who would share his enthusiasm and so he took great trouble over appointments—he could call on frank personal advice from universities throughout the world in the process. He was not necessarily orthodox in his own preferences provided the person being considered had promise, for James had a nose for detecting academic excellence—and that was what he valued above all else, though he was careful to foster and maintain close friendly relations between the youthful university and its city and state. His many acts of kindness to colleagues and students will never be fully known, for he was, despite being a man who enjoyed conversation and good gossip, most discreet.

He was born in Portadown, the elder of the two sons of the Rev. Canon J. W. Auchmuty, the first of the Scottish family to come to Ireland, of whom perhaps the best known was Samuel Auchmuty, an associate of Lachlan Macquarie and Sir Richard Bourke. Good foundations had been laid for his subsequent life in his schooling at Armagh Royal School, and at Trinity College, Dublin, where he read History and Political Science and obtained a First Class Moderatorship and a Gold Medal in 1931. The same year he became Auditor of the College Historical Society, an honour he greatly enjoyed, for the Society's traditions went back to its founder Edmund Burke.

Auchmuty obtained a PhD in 1935, and his first academic post was a lectureship in Education at Dublin University (1936-46) which he combined

with a teaching post at Sandford Park School; he was then appointed an assistant professor in charge of the Department of Modern History at Farouk University, Alexandria. Next he took up a senior lectureship in History at the New South Wales University of Technology in 1952—after the Egyptian Government had dismissed all its British employees. He was made the University's Dean of Arts and Social Sciences (1956) though he had moved, after eighteen months in Sydney, to Newcastle University College, where he became Professor of History in 1955, and Warden (1960-61).

When he was appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1965 he was determined to keep his scholarship alive. He had previously written *US Government and Latin American Independence 1810-1830* (1937); *Irish Education: A Historical Survey* (1937); *Sir Thomas Wyse 1791-1862* (1939) and *Lecky* (1948). There were always many articles for journals and many reviews; these show his interest in his surroundings, Egyptian and Australian subjects following upon Irish, and there was the expression of his long-lasting interest in Lord Acton, many of whose precepts he took to heart. His capacity for seeing the way the trees make up the wood is suitably illustrated in the essay 'Australian universities: the historical background' in *The Humanities in Australia*, ed. A. Grenfell Price (1959).

After administration claimed more of his time he nonetheless determinedly continued to find opportunities to work in libraries, his frequent travelling to Europe and America providing opportunities to develop his already extensive knowledge of them even further. He edited *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay* (1970); then, after he retired in 1974, he was an Honorary Visiting Fellow of the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University at Canberra from 1975-6, and Visiting Professor in Commonwealth History at the University of Leeds from 1976 to 1977. He revelled in the opportunity these posts gave him for his own researches—and, *inter alia*, for giving an excellent address to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1977 on support for research in the Arts in general. He found particular pleasure in linking places with past actions or personalities—I can remember vividly the delight with which he visited Stirling Castle and the Church of the Holy Rood where he discovered one of his ancestors helped in the baptism of James I; and on his last visit to Scotland he enjoyed visiting Auchmithie, whence the family originated—descendants of a member, an Abbot possibly, of the Abbey at Arbroath.

This intellectual curiosity was matched by an interest in people which made him a very good chairman and committee member. He was the first Chairman of the Irish Committee of Historical Studies (1938-44) and a member of the International Committee on the Teaching of History (1938). A Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (1938), he was also a member of the Royal Irish Academy from 1941. He was a member of the Australia National Committee for UNESCO from 1962 and its chairman from 1973-76. He chaired the advisory committee on teaching Asian Languages and Cultures

(1969); after this he was a member of the Australian Education Mission to the South Pacific (1970). He also served on Australian delegations to Commonwealth Education Conferences in 1968 and 1971.

After his retirement, when he moved from Newcastle to Canberra, he took on the heavy load of chairing the Australian National Inquiry into Teacher Education, for which his own earlier experience had particularly fitted him. However, the Chairmanship which probably gave him most pleasure was that of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, of which he attended fifty meetings in all, being Chairman from 1969-71. He wrote the first of the committee's triennial reports and, virtually as a reflex action, its history. His intimate understanding of politics—and politicians—was extremely useful to Australian universities; and he also enjoyed being among his peers when he was a member of the executive committee of the Association of Commonwealth Universities—which awarded him its Simons prize for his services to the Association. This was a silver ladle, and James liked the hint of the long spoon involved. Many honours crowned his career; he was awarded a CBE in 1971 and received honorary degrees from the Universities of Dublin, of Sydney and of Newcastle in 1974.

James enjoyed life enormously; he had a largeness of vision—he was physically a big man—a warmheartedness that allowed him to be both tolerant and kind, and he had a rich sense of humour. He was a highly efficient man, full of foresight who, having prepared the ground skilfully, fought economically and effectively for his beliefs.

Friendship meant much to James. He was eminently, in Johnson's phrase, a clubbable man, and he brought a gusto to living: it was a sheer pleasure to hear his bubbling laughter in the Athenaeum or in one of his three Australian clubs. Wherever they were, he and his wife Margaret (*née* Walters) were most hospitable to an ever-increasing circle of friends. She brought to their marriage an American sensibility and energy, having herself been educated at Vassar. She was President of the Australian Federation of Women from 1974 to 1977. They had their sorrows as well as joys in life but were never heard to complain of them. Indeed in his last letter James was rhapsodic about the joys of regaining his failing sight (for a modern operation for cataract, carried out in Canberra, had been highly successful), and delighted to be going to the wedding of his son Professor Giles Auchmuty in Illinois. He is survived by his wife, his son, Professor Giles A., and his daughter, Dr Rosemary K. Auchmuty, and deeply missed by all who knew him.

*A. N. Jeffares*