



Allan Edwards

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ALLAN EDWARDS WHO DIED ON 7 AUGUST 1995 will always hold a very special place in the annals of the Australian Humanities Academy since he was an inaugural Fellow, one of the founding fathers.

Most professors of English have only a brief after-life, since their reputations are built upon published works which can all too quickly be superseded. Allan Edwards laid down more substantial and long lasting foundations for posterity, and his contribution to the humanities in Australia, and to the University of Western Australia in particular, cannot be forgotten or eclipsed. Amongst his many material achievements were the planning of the New Fortune Theatre, a replica of the Elizabethan Fortune, which was designed almost by stealth before the administrators delegated to construct a new Arts building were aware of what was happening. He also participated in the designing of the Dolphin, the Octagon, the Somerville, and the Sunken Garden on this theatre-rich campus, and he even acted as architect in designing a building (now demolished) to house the languages departments. He single-handedly laid the basis for what is still one of the world's most impressive collections of paintings by Sidney Nolan, long before Nolan was recognised as a major talent, and he persuaded the University's Gallery to acquire Arthur Boyd's ceramic *Mother and Child* (now in the National Gallery of Victoria), also installing many impressive works of sculpture which were, and still are, hidden away on the campus because of the controversy they caused on their acquisition. Time has proved his taste and judgement to be true. He was a pioneer of theatre in the west of Australia, actively supporting professionals and amateurs alike, and holding readings of plays and poetry at his home. He was one of the team that initiated *Westerly*. He built up through shrewd recruitment and an indefatigable emphasis on energetic teaching, an impressive department of English, which turned out graduates who took influential positions around Australia in the profession at a shaping time. This is no mean feat when the department's fate could well have been aimless *belle-lettrisme* and provincialism. He was head of department for an astonishing thirty-four years, and he was for many years also head of French, Italian and Spanish, and more briefly, of Classics.

Edwards's greatest act of foresight was to accept the initiative of the Archivist of the University of Western Australia and to leave a lengthy oral-history memoir recorded in March, 1984. The

transcription leaves us with not only a remarkably comprehensive impression of his life and of the University of Western Australia in its formative years, but also gives an indelible sense of his character. It brings us intimately in touch with a humorous, determined, strong and clear-sighted personality, who was quick and sure in judgment. His north-of-England bluntness, common sense and innate curiosity inform everything he says, and it is not hard to understand why many were in awe of his devastatingly accurate wit, as well as his learning.

Edwards was born in Bolton, Lancashire, on 5 September, 1909, and as a boy growing up he voraciously devoured the resources of the Bolton public library. Only the restraining influence of the *Manchester Guardian*, he says, preserved him from becoming a communist, at a time when all his friends sympathised with that cause as undergraduates. The opportunity to go to Cambridge came through a local Bolton scholarship, and the experience of university shaped his intellectual career. He studied under Leavis and Richards, both of whom were impressed by his potential, and after taking an excellent degree, he moved on to a senior lectureship at Cape Town. Seeing the war coming, and finding South Africa 'too full of race and political conflict', he looked actively for an escape from that country, eventually bringing his young family to Western Australia. He took up the vacant chair of English in 1941 as the successor to Walter Murdoch.

Edwards was an innovative and inspiring teacher of undergraduates. On joining the University of Western Australia he inaugurated the tutorial system in an attempt to use group discussion to get students to form and change their impressions of literary works in an open-minded way, insisting always that literature had a bearing on life and vice versa. This perhaps explains his avowed support for Freudianism as a help in literary explication. He regarded linguistics as central, at a time when that discipline was just emerging from the antiquarianism of philology. He coaxed students and staff alike to work with immense industry, and one of his feats of academic leadership was single-handedly to produce voluminous teaching materials which now would constitute many textbooks. It is doubly impressive that he did so during the War years and afterwards, when printed materials were largely inaccessible. Undoubtedly, producing these teaching materials at short notice dis-

tracted him from his own independent research, although nobody at the time regretted the outcome, as his students, professionally prepared, fanned out into the profession, via an obligatory stint at Cambridge reading for a second BA, some into chairs across Australia. The high quality of criticism that Edwards could have developed, if his times had been as obsessed as ours are about research output, is witnessed by a prize monograph on T S Eliot and an essay on Webster which was published in *Scrutiny*.

Allan Edwards enjoyed academic life to the full, throwing himself into teaching, encouraging the development of drama and theatre, and demonstrating a connoisseur's appreciation of art. Former students tell of his ebullient spirits and gruff light heartedness, and of his constant canine companion who even attended tutorials. I came very late into his life, and in an insignificant role, but everything I saw testified to a direct and strongly etched character. Then in his late seventies but looking twenty years younger, he spoke with gusto of his feats in cooking and of his passion for swimming in the sea. He was a loyal follower of Claremont Football Club, attending matches regularly for more than twenty years, and a keen cricket enthusiast. Edwards continued to demonstrate that one could be an academic and at the same time an involved and enthusiastic member of the wider community.

The Academy is impoverished by the loss of Professor Allan Edwards, but it can be invigorated by the memory of his life.

R S White