



RALPH BARSTOW FARRELL

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1908-1983

Ralph Farrell, Emeritus Professor of German at the University of Sydney, a foundation member of the Australian Humanities Research Council as well as of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, died, after a long illness, on 24 June 1983 shortly after his seventy-fifth birthday. He was a true Sydneysider all his life in spite of his strong inclination to explore the world and Europe in particular. He was educated at Bondi Public School and Sydney High School before studying from 1926 at the University of Sydney. Winning scholarships and prizes during his University studies, he graduated with Honours in English, French and German. Later he added to his linguistic skills a good working knowledge of Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Italian and Spanish, and taught the first three of these to interested students.

During a spell of teaching at Newcastle High School, Ralph Farrell began a course for the degree of Master of Arts. One of his closest friends was the far older Christopher Brennan on whose poetry he wished to base his thesis. But such was the narrow-mindedness of the then Senate of the University of Sydney that the twenty-three-year-old postgraduate student was informed by the Registrar that — as Professor Leslie Rogers discovered — ‘a thesis dealing exclusively or principally with the critical and creative work of Mr Brennan, presented by one of his disciples, is not suitable from the point of view of Mr Brennan’s former colleagues’ — Brennan had been dismissed by the Senate as Associate Professor of German and Comparative Literature in 1925. It may well have been an act of defiance that Farrell chose as an alternative subject the poetry of Brennan’s most beloved German writer, Rainer Maria Rilke, for which, shortly after Brennan’s death at the end of 1932, he was awarded the degree of Master of Arts with First Class Honours, the University Medal and the Woolley Travelling Scholarship of £A200 a year. The latter enabled him to study in Germany for three years (1933-1936), and he chose Berlin as the centre for his studies, having in mind the excellence of the *Deutsche Seminar* in the Hegelstrasse.

Farrell arrived in Berlin only a few months after Hitler had come to power and therefore he was an eyewitness of one of the most turbulent, upsetting as well as depressing developments in German history. It was at this time that I met Ralph Farrell for the first time; it was in the reading room of the Prussian State Library at Unter den Linden. A gentleman next to me said in impeccable

German he had seen me in the German Seminar Library (I was then an 'Assistant' to Professor Julius Petersen) and wished to introduce himself. It was then, late in 1933 or early in 1934, that the seeds of a friendship were sown that was to last for half a century, although it never occurred to us then that we would be close colleagues one day.

The *Deutsche Seminar* at that time was in turmoil. Two watchdogs had been imposed on the liberal Julius Petersen; first a fanatical Nazi from Vienna with the name of Stumfl who had written on *Germanische Kultspiele* which in reality had never existed; then, more seriously, Gerhard Fricke from Göttingen, a first-class scholar and existentialist philosopher whose sudden conversion to Nazism took everyone by surprise. Gustav Neckel, the 'Nordist', Farrell's teacher in Gothic, had swallowed the Nazi myth of the superiority of the Germanic race unquestioningly and preached it accordingly. The highly esteemed Professor Max Hermann was dismissed as a 'non-Aryan'. The eminent Richard Alewyn, dismissed from his chair in Heidelberg as successor to Friedrich Gundolf, returned to Berlin for a short period of time. Erich Trunz became a Lector in Amsterdam and I in Cambridge. Ulrich Pretzel, the outstanding mediaevalist, 'Assistant' and Librarian quietly but stubbornly opposed everything the Nazis stood for, whereas Petersen made embarrassing concessions in the belief he could prevent worse things happening; in particular, he wrongly hoped to keep the German Goethe Society, whose President he was, on a neutral course.

Ralph Farrell was a careful observer in all this and of what was happening around him. He utilized all the facilities which Berlin offered to advance his knowledge of German literature in the widest sense and to acquire the scholarly skills Petersen's and other seminars still offered in spite of pressures from outside. He resented the all powerful National Socialist Students' League and its rallies, marches, pompous speeches and songs, the noisy backdrop to increasing persecution and to concentration camps. Farrell continued to work under Petersen on a doctoral thesis dealing with aspects of the work and aesthetics of the influential poet Stefan George (1868-1933) for which he was awarded the degree of Dr.phil. *cum laude*. He was just in time, for soon after George became persona non grata with the régime. In the wake of his studies Farrell became personally acquainted with several members of the 'George Circle' that included Klaus von Stauffenberg who, in July 1944 as Colonel of the General Staff, organised and carried out the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life. Farrell published his thesis, in German, under the title *Stefan Georges Beziehungen zur englischen Literatur* (1937).

Equipped with an enormous amount of literary knowledge and with unique experience in European life, letters and affairs, Ralph Farrell returned to Sydney to take up on 1 June 1937 an Assistant Lectureship under his former teacher E. G. Waterhouse, from whom he also acquired his love of flowers, and of camellias in particular. In 1945 Farrell was promoted to Senior Lecturer and

in 1946 he became the McCaughey Professor of German, a position he held for 27 years. During this period he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Arts for no fewer than eight years, in two spells, 1950-1955 and 1963-1967. From 1965-1967 he was also a Fellow of the Senate. He was for a time President of the Sydney Arts Society and President of AULLA, was awarded by the Goethe-Institute in Munich first its Silver and then its Gold Medal and was honoured by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany by being made Commander of the Republic's Order of Merit.

Several thousand students can testify to Ralph Farrell's teaching abilities in the fields of language, literary history and criticism. A full bibliography of his scholarly work appeared in the *Festschrift for Ralph Farrell* ed. by A. Stephens, H. L. Rogers and B. Coghlan (Peter Lang, Berne 1977). His *Dictionary of German Synonyms* (CUP 1953, 3rd ed. 1977) may be singled out, for it established his international reputation; it 'has found no competitor and still stands unchallenged in its field' (R. St. Leon). It is far more than a dictionary; it displays a wonderful *Sprachgefühl* in German and English, an empathy and sensitivity for not only linguistic and philological, but equally for historical and philosophical phenomena. His intensive study of English and other languages and literatures came to fruition in this work. His illness prevented him from carrying out the plan of a literary biography of Eduard Mörike, a Swabian poet and writer he was especially fond of and about whom he had written previously.

As an organiser Ralph Farrell was always an interested innovator. He was one of the founders of AULLA, and for teachers of German as well as for the general public interested in German life and letters we together formed the Australian Goethe Society, at first as a branch of the English Goethe Society whose then President, the eminent Germanist L. A. Willoughby had greatly encouraged us.

All this, his learning, his scholarly achievements, his linguistic facility, his organising talent, was not the whole Ralph Farrell. He was, when still in good health, imbued with an abundance of *joie de vivre*. He was gregarious, convivial, genial and generous to a fault. He loved good food. He loved entertaining his friends not only at home or in Sydney but also abroad. In discussions of problems, philological, philosophical or political, and of works of literature his arguments were penetrating, but when it came to the lighter side of conviviality he could be extremely witty, occasionally caustic.

Ralph's greatest disappointment was his inability to utilize his retirement for the many plans he had made while still in office, in particular extensive travel and, above all, writing. But shortly after the AULLA Congress at Sydney University in 1967 which as President he organized meticulously and highly successfully, an illness befell him, which was followed by others. He still but only occasionally, attended Academy and AULLA meetings; he travelled to Melbourne for the last time in 1981, but he became weaker during the last

two years until he succumbed in June 1983.

Among the many tributes to him a private one may be quoted. Dennis Green, Schroder Professor of German at the University of Cambridge, wrote on 4 August 1983:

'We were both very fond indeed of Ralph and treasured his personality and his generosity . . . for many Germanists Australia without Ralph Farrell will be a place hard to imagine and certainly in human terms the poorer.'

*R. H. Samuel*