

Obituary

IAN RAMSAY MAXWELL

Ian Ramsay Maxwell who died on 4 September 1979, was born in Melbourne in 1901. He was educated at Scotch College, Melbourne and proceeded from there to the University of Melbourne where he took degrees in both Arts and Law. From 1926 until 1931 he practised as a barrister in Melbourne. In 1932 he went to Oxford and, in a decisive change of direction, elected to work for the BLitt in English. He completed his work in 1934, work which later appeared in a revised form in his *French Farce and John Heywood*. This work generated an interest in French literature of the later Middle Ages which never left him and to the end of his teaching career Chrétien de Troyes, *Aucassin and Nicolette* and Villon formed an integral part of the courses which he taught.

His earliest academic appointment was as docent in the University of Copenhagen between 1934 and 1936 and there he absorbed, *inter alia*, his enduring interest in lexicography and historical linguistics, in part at least through the influence of Otto Jespersen. His later cultivation of the literature and language of Scandinavia is not, however, directly related to this phase of his life.

Between 1936 and 1946 he taught in the English department of the University of Sydney from which he returned to the University of Melbourne to take up the Chair of English Language and Literature, which he occupied until retirement in 1968. In this new position, in addition to the administrative tasks inescapably attached to the position, including a term as Dean of the Faculty of Arts, he pursued the interests which he had developed and fostered in Sydney—in particular the tradition of narrative in the West stretching from Homer to Malory—in a role that was characteristically, almost uniquely, his as a distinguished and compelling lecturer at all levels of student endeavour. His powers as a teacher with both elementary and advanced classes were legendary, but his performance in less formal modes of teaching was equally distinguished. It was before all else as a teacher that he was to make his characteristic contribution to the Melbourne department and it was primarily as a teacher that his presence exercised a decisive influence over a range of student interest at all levels. And the range of this teaching activity was wide, as he moved easily and authoritatively from French *chanson de geste* and courtly romance through Malory and Border Ballads to Milton, Defoe, Gibbon, Burns, Keats, Peacock, Borrow, as far as T. S. Eliot. It was a range often regarded as eccentric; it was certainly *sui generis* in a strict sense, but for those who knew him both consistent and intelligible.

All these interests persisted; some were represented in his regrettably small body of publications. But increasingly they became subordinated to his rich and deep knowledge of the literature and language of medieval Iceland. He

had long since known the literature of the saga and the *Edda* before, at the age of nearly fifty, he undertook that intense study of the language and its literature which was to dominate his later years. This study, though beginning late, was to produce in him, according to the testimony of his friend Gabriel Turville-Petre, an ear for and a grasp of nuance of Icelandic idiom rarely equalled by a foreigner. His reading and his rendering of the saga literature in particular was magisterial though once more, unhappily, represented only by sparse, if authoritative, publications. The later years of his tenure of the chair and his post-retirement activities found their passionate centre in the distinguished cultivation of this area which continued decisively to influence the tastes and interests of large numbers of students and established for him a firm reputation in the world of Norse studies. It was entirely fitting that, in 1966, he was created Chevalier of the Order of the Icelandic Falcon.

This deep commitment to his study of selected areas of Western literature was literally encapsulated in a way of life again emphatically *sui generis*: a way of life centred upon a love of physical activity ranging from boxing to tree-felling, a passionate love of the outdoors, especially of the Victorian hill-country around Mansfield. Almost to the end, despite increasing physical handicaps, these twin passions were dominant and sustained.

His was a life rich in friendships over a characteristically wide range of men and women drawn together by his equally wide range of interests, the depth and mellow warmth of his personality, his wisdom, his informality, his dedication and his unobtrusive authority. It was a range of interests that decisively marked both his own department and the nature of studies in the humanities of his university. It was a range fully becoming a Fellow of the Academy.

G. H. Russell