

Obituary

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR ROBERT GORDON MENZIES,
KT, CH, LL.M., QC, FRS, FAA, FAHA



ROBERT GORDON MENZIES

Photo by courtesy of the University of Melbourne

SIR ROBERT MENZIES who died on 15 May 1978 dominated Australian public life during—and not only during—his long prime ministership (1949–66). His career in both domestic and international politics will occupy historians in the future. This short note is concerned with his support of scholarship, and, more particularly in this context, with his support of scholarship in the humanities—an aspect of his career which brought him the keenest personal satisfaction.

He gave a warm welcome to a deputation from the newly-formed Australian Humanities Research Council in July 1955 and later announced that his Government would grant the Council £4,000 a year, putting it on a similar footing to the Social Science Research Council and the Academy of Science. In 1957 he appointed the Murray Committee, and, following its report, established the Australian Universities Commission, thereby putting Commonwealth Government support for the universities on a regular and permanent basis. There could later be argument about the wisdom or the effects of particular University Commission policies, but not about the immense stimulus to university development in Australia given by its establishment.

Menzies was elected as an Honorary Member of the Australian Humanities Research Council in 1964, and as such became a Foundation Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities on the granting of its Royal Charter in 1969. If his election in 1964 recognized his public services to the universities in general and to the Australian Humanities Research Council in particular, it recognized more than this.

A distinguished undergraduate course (with Firsts in his History subjects as well as in Law) had given early promise of academic achievement had he chosen such a career. Instead, the busy practice of law and politics captured his interest. Nevertheless, he remained a reader, whose keenness of mind and care in the use of words gave him the freedom of any civilized company.

His election recognized also his firm belief in the important role of humane studies in any civilized country. Older Fellows will remember an after-dinner talk he gave to members of the AHRC: society must hold the sciences and the humanities in a balanced partnership. He wrote in his 'Foreword' to *The Humanities in Australia*, 'If we are to escape from this modern barbarism, humane studies must come back into their own; not as the enemies of science, but as its guides and philosophic friends'.

When the AHRC sought a Royal Charter constituting the Australian Academy of the Humanities, his advice and help were freely given, and he took a keen and practical interest in the matter. He had also begun to seek

some measure of private endowment for the Academy when failing health made such efforts no longer possible for him.

Honorary doctorates of some twenty-four universities no doubt paid tribute to his eminence as a statesman and to his service to universities; they were also conferred on a liberally educated man who valued his association with universities and other learned societies. His return as Chancellor (1967-72) to the University of Melbourne in which he had been an undergraduate was only a later chapter in a life-long respect for true learning.

R. M. Crawford