



Raymond Bruce Mitchell
(1920–2010)

Raymond Bruce Mitchell
(1920–2010)



Everything Bruce Mitchell said, did or wrote had the distinctive mark of Bruce and of no one else: it was all simultaneously trenchant, funny, generous and very definitely Australian. It was all, despite the seriousness of purpose, such terrific fun. His clarity of mind and ready, irrepressible smile were inseparable from the clarity of his moral purpose. Whatever Bruce was involved with, be it scholarship, religion, pedagogy or family, there was nothing abstract or half-hearted about his involvement. Instead the commitments were grounded in real institutions that were each enlivened by his habits – habits of regularity, boundless good humour, and very hard work. The prime sense of the Old English ancestor of the word ‘truth’ is ‘fidelity’, or ‘troth’. Bruce’s entire, inspiring life was circumscribed by the senses of these glorious words: fidelity and truth.

Raymond Bruce Mitchell was born on 8 January 1920, the son of a Baptist (later Presbyterian) minister who acquired a Bachelor of Divinity from the University of Melbourne under great pressure of circumstance. Bruce was the product of a perhaps bygone, non-affluent Australia that was upright, hard working and cheerful. He was educated at Carey Baptist Grammar School in Melbourne, from which he matriculated at the unusually early age of 15. He paid his way through the University of Melbourne by teaching between 1936 and 1941, securing his Pass Bachelor’s degree in 1940. Between 1941 and 1946 Bruce served in the Australian Army, his latest post being Intelligence Officer for the Fourth Australian Armoured Brigade; on discharge he held the rank of Captain. After a two-year stint as manager of a typesetting firm, he returned to the University of Melbourne, where by 1948 he had a First Class Honours degree from the School of English, and by 1950 he was a Lecturer in that department and Resident Tutor in English Language and Literature at Ormond College Melbourne. His First Class MA (1952) on an aspect of Old English syntax secured him an Australian National University scholarship that same year to Oxford, where, also that same packed year, he was married to his lifelong, devoted companion Mollie (née Miller).

Oxford, with its clearly defined sets of close-knit institutions and their attendant loyalties, customs and fellowship, suited Bruce, just as he suited Oxford. Already by 1954–55 he was Lecturer at both Merton College and St Edmund Hall; in 1955, with the strong support of J. R. R. Tolkien, Bruce was appointed as Fellow and Tutor at St Edmund Hall, to which tight-knit community he was devoted for the rest of his life. In 1964 he gained promotion as University Lecturer in English Language.

By 1959 Bruce was Dr Bruce Mitchell, for his D. Phil. on subordinate clauses in Old English poetry. By the age of 39, then, he was institutionally established and ready to practise as a fully-fledged scholar. He capitalised on this not by furious production of monographs. There were, to be sure, a steady flow of articles (I remember him celebrating his fiftieth published article, like a cricketer celebrating a half-century, in Oxford in 1981 – Bruce loved cricket, or, more accurately, the Australian cricket team). But the pattern of his book production tells a story, once again, of commitments: commitment to a discipline and commitment to the most arduous kinds of scholarship. In 1965 the first edition of *A Guide to Old English* appeared. The revised edition of 1982 saw Fred Robinson of Yale University join Bruce in this immensely successful guide, from which thousands of undergraduates learned not only the language, but also a love of the exceptionally rich literature of earlier medieval England. That a guide should inspire students (it certainly inspired me when I first used it in 1974 at the University of Melbourne) is unusual, but Bruce's enthusiasm shone even through arduous philological accounts of i-mutation. Bruce loved the language and the literature of Anglo-Saxon England, and he wanted others, lots of others, to love it too.

Tucked away, however, in the list of Bruce's publications is an entry for 1985, unassumingly titled *Old English Syntax*. This is Bruce's *magnum opus*, the monumental, two-volume book on which he patiently worked for twenty five years, starting in 1959, immediately after the award of his D. Phil. Bruce, true to origins as ever, preserved the terminology of Latin syntax and so, in retrospect, ensured the evergreen quality of his major contribution. The work involved in producing this book was monstrous (I saw it close up as I worked in the spring of 1981 as one of Bruce's many research assistants). In his own lively if brief autobiography, Bruce not immodestly says: 'Organization was a major feat';¹ he also recognises the major contribution of his wife Mollie. Another short, excellent biography of Bruce by his niece Ann Kinnear, says this about Bruce and technology: 'Bruce was well known for his views on technology. There are early adopters and late adopters and then there is Bruce', who wrote his scholarship by hand.² Enter Mollie Mitchell, who typed the *entire manuscript* into accurate typescript, which was then checked against the manuscript viva voce. Checking of this kind was applied to page proofs and final proofs, leaving 'fewer than ten' typos, by Bruce's reckoning, in a vast and massively detailed, highly technical text. In 1987 the book was awarded the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Prize by the British Academy.

Bruce Mitchell was elected as a Member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1989, and as an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2002.

The name 'Mitchell' means 'big' in Old English (*micel*). Bruce Mitchell was indeed Bruce Big: he was great and truehearted; we remember his '*eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc*' ('nobility and his deeds of courage', *Beowulf*, line 3173).

James Simpson

1 Bruce Mitchell, *A Many-Coloured Life: School Teacher: Army Officer: Businessman: Oxford Don and Old English Syntactician, An Autobiography of Bruce Mitchell*, unpublished, p. 14. This text was kindly sent to me by St Edmund Hall Oxford.

2 Ann C. Kinnear, 'Raymond Bruce Mitchell, 8 January 1920 – 30 January 2010', unpublished. I am exceptionally grateful to Ms Kinnear for her affectionate text and her help in preparing this record.