



*Eric Francis Osborn*  
(1922–2007)

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Eric Osborn, who died last May after a long and bravely borne illness, was the most formidable authority on early Christian thought that Australia has ever produced. His research on second-century theology, distilled in a series of impressive monographs, presented a thesis on the development of the beginnings of Christian theology and philosophy that commands widespread respect. After his experiences in Cambridge and other European centres of learning, he was tempted to pursue an academic career overseas, but he decided to return to Melbourne, where he taught theology for three decades.

There were many formative experiences in his early years that prepared Eric for a life of theological scholarship. He grew up in a devout Methodist home, where the Bible was read and the hymns of the Wesleys were sung. While he was a scholarship boy at Wesley College he felt the call to the ministry. As Dux of the school he won a scholarship to Queen's College at the University of Melbourne and started on an arts degree in preparation for his theological studies. But these plans were brusquely interrupted by war service in New Guinea. As he would later say, this experience taught him a huge amount about relating to others in times of both stress and boredom. Characteristically, he took with him his Greek New Testament and his copy of Plato's *Republic*, tattered books that were treasured later in life.

During his studies at the University he came under the influence of Professor Boyce Gibson, who instilled in him the conviction that philosophy and theology were not incompatible, indeed that philosophy had a great contribution to make in the study of theology. Not long before his death, while we were chatting, Eric opened up his filing cabinet and effortlessly found the note that Boyce Gibson had written him on the eve of his departure for England, exhorting him to devote his considerable talents to the cause of Christian truth. His years at Cambridge studying under Telfer and Chadwick were of deep significance, as were the years of service in Methodist

congregations in the towns of Victoria. All of this prepared him for his life's work, which began in the formal sense when in 1958 he was appointed Lecturer and not long afterwards Professor of New Testament and Early Church History at the Theological Hall of Queen's College (later of the Uniting Church).

His achievements have been very considerable and can be measured in at least two different ways. A first approach would be to contemplate a row of eight books, seven of them published by Cambridge University Press. They represent the distillation of thousands of hours of reading, thinking and writing. The first and last of these books analyse the thought of Eric's greatest love in the world of the Church fathers, Clement of Alexandria. The first was his dissertation, the product of youthful energy, which set the tone for all his later endeavours. The last was a grand synthesis, completed just before his physical powers began to fail. Three of the remaining six books focused on other great Christian thinkers of the second century: Justin, Tertullian and Irenaeus. The other three were more thematic, treating the subjects of ethics, philosophy, and theology in the narrow sense of the doctrine of God. There were many other publications, dutifully listed in his two *Festschriften*, one for his sixty-fifth and one for his eightieth birthday. But these eight books are what he will be remembered for. Very few scholars publish eight substantial monographs. Half of them were written after he retired from teaching at the mandatory age in 1987 and accepted the offer to become a Professorial Fellow in the History Department at La Trobe University. He remained productive until close to the end. Just before his eightieth birthday he was still awarded a last Australian Research Council grant, which helped him bring his life's work to a close.

A second approach would be to consider all those whom he influenced and guided in his long career as teacher and research supervisor. Eric's strong personality struck all those who came into contact with him. Some were attracted into following on the paths of theological scholarship that he set out for them. He was generous in giving of his time and his advice. Every year he would organise a seminar in the February heat in which younger scholars could present the fruits of their scholarly research. The last of these took place in the year of his death. A number of his pupils have gone on to prominent positions in the Church and in theological education. His influence will live on in their contributions.

Originality was important for Eric, but not in the conventional sense of saying something in a way that had not been done before. He knew that was not easy in a field in which scholars had been working for centuries. Originality for him was rather the attempt to get back to the origin of things, the *arché*, which, as the Gospel of John sets out so beautifully and clearly, is God as he has manifested himself in Christ, the Word made flesh. The main lines of Eric's thought were distinctive and well thought through, combining the historical and the systematic. The second century was for him the most vital period for the history of Christian thought, because it

was then that Jerusalem has its decisive encounter with Athens, when the Gospel embarked on an epoch-making partnership with philosophy. Eric's chief and very bold claim was that the resultant theology was able to answer intellectual problems, in the domain of both metaphysics and ethics, that otherwise defied resolution. His thinking was rigorously analytical, setting aside what was not central, cutting to the core of the issue. The style of presentation was consistent with the method. Sentences were tight and spare, often strung together in long sequences. More was said on one page than others would say in ten. It might be exhausting to read, but always worth the effort. A whole world of thought was opened up, set out and made clear. His mind, once made up, was not easily shifted, but there were exceptions. Early on, under the influence of Chadwick, he had decided that the thought of Philo the Jewish thinker was peripheral. Later he saw that this view was one-sided, but did not want to put him on the same level as Clement.

Eric's life as a scholar was rich and fulfilled. He received many honours. He had the rare distinction of being the only Australian ever to be awarded a Cambridge doctorate in divinity, the highest degree that the ancient University has on offer. There was also his early election to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the two *Festschriften*, appointment as Fellow of Queen's College, and in recent years the award of a Centenary Medal. In his later years he would often reflect on whether his decision to stay in Australia had been the right one. Alert to the dangers of scholarly isolation, he felt a strong need for the solid food of intellectual conversation and was prepared to make long journeys to obtain it. There were long stays on research leave in five centres of academic excellence: Cambridge, Tübingen, Strassbourg, Pittsburgh, Rome. He proudly recalled receiving the future Pope Benedict XVI for a cup of tea in his rooms in Tübingen. The appropriateness of this was not lost on some of his Australian friends who called him 'il Papa' in recognition of his dominant intellectual presence. It was certainly remarkable that there was a holiday house only a hundred metres from the Point Lonsdale lighthouse that was filled with Patristic texts and maybe a hundredweight of learned photocopies. Many scholars overseas thought that this little place was the centre of Australian Patristic activity, and perhaps in a sense it was. The fresh air at Point Lonsdale activated his brain, especially in the early morning. It was there that the main ideas of his books were formulated. There were of course things he didn't like, particularly red tape and serving on committees. Not all fellow-scholars and colleagues aroused his admiration in equal measure. His wonderful sense of humour could on occasion have a sharp edge. Indeed, it sometimes took new acquaintances a little while to get the hang of his unique combination of immodesty and self-deprecation. Nevertheless he had a gift for friendship and could show great pastoral concern for those in his circle of friends who suffered losses or found themselves in difficulties. As his days drew gradually to a close, he was surrounded by family and friends, both from the academic world and outside it.

While still at school he met his future wife Lorna Grierson. They both went up to

Queen's College together (she as a non-resident) and, after Eric's years of war service and undergraduate study were over, were married in the Chapel in 1946. It was the beginning of a long and loving partnership that lasted more than sixty years. Eric was proud of the achievements of his sons Robert and Peter, their partners, and his five grandchildren. In his final years he was also able to dote on two great-grandchildren.

*David T. Runia*