

JOHN ALEXANDER SALMOND

1937–2013

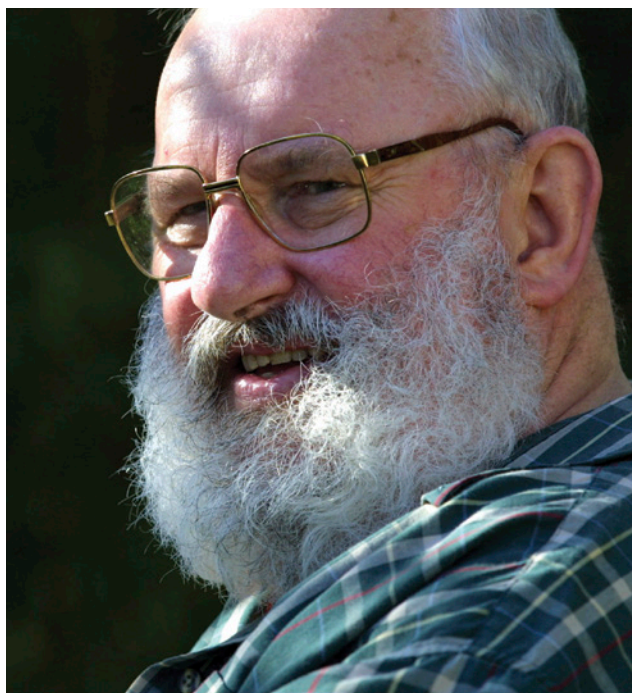


PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE SALMOND FAMILY

John Alexander Salmond was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, on 28 September 1937, into a numerous family whose principals had migrated from Scotland towards the end of the nineteenth century, to establish themselves in farming, business and academic and religious pursuits.

John's educational career was punctuated between high school and university by spells as a slaughterman and reporter. He graduated BA from the University of Otago in 1959, and MA in 1961. In this year, he accepted a scholarship to join the Commonwealth Studies postgraduate programme at Duke University, in Durham, NC. He obtained his PhD in 1964, but having become interested in Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, instead of a British Commonwealth topic, his dissertation was on the Civilian Conservation Corps. Returning to New Zealand, Salmond took up a lectureship in History at Victoria University, Wellington. In 1968, he was appointed to the History Department in the fledgling La Trobe University, and promoted to professor in 1970. While he spent repeated intervals overseas on fellowships and sabbaticals, La Trobe remained John's academic home until his retirement in 2002.

Though he began his academic career as a student of Commonwealth history (his first task at Wellington was to lecture on British India), Salmond's scholarly focus soon changed markedly. He was in the forefront of that notable post-Second World War development in tertiary education in Australia and New Zealand, which saw significant numbers of intending academics attend North American institutions to obtain higher qualifications, in preference to following traditional pathways to Britain and Europe.

Salmond's doctoral study of the Civilian Conservation Corps was to prove a prelude to a passionate career-long interest in Southern Liberalism and the Civil Rights movement. A number of factors contributed to this interest. By the time he was an adolescent, he had developed a strong commitment to an egalitarian society with liberal values. His experiences of segregation in the American South powerfully reinforced this sense – as he reminisced in his last essay: 'It was living in Durham ... during the early 1960s, the Kennedy years, the King years, the years of the widening struggle to end the Southern caste system, to overthrow white supremacy that pushed me towards southern history.' He was deeply moved by John F. Kennedy's June 1963 speech exhorting the nation to affirm the rights of all its citizens; and he participated in the massive Civil Rights march in Washington that late August day in 1963, when Martin Luther King delivered his 'I have a dream' speech. The Civil Rights Act followed in 1964. Salmond knew these events to be turning points in modern American history. He also understood them to be defining moments in his own history, for he viewed them in a Wordsworthian light: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven!'

In a very active scholarly life, as well as many articles and essays, Salmond produced a long series of monographs and edited collections of essays dealing with labour and civil rights topics, including *A Southern Rebel: The Life and Times of Aubrey Willis Williams, 1890–1965* (1983); (with Bruce Clayton) *The South Is Another Land* (1987); *Miss Lucy of the CIO* (1988); *The Conscience of a Lawyer: Clifford J. Durr and American Civil Liberties, 1899–1975* (1990); *Gastonia 1929* (1995); *My Mind Set on Freedom* (1997); *The General Textile Strike of 1934* (2002); *Southern Struggles* (2004); and (with Timothy Minchin) *After the Dream: Black and White Southerners since 1965* (2011).

At La Trobe University, Salmond oversaw the expansion of the History Department. He guided generations of students through the intricacies of United States history; he supervised many postgraduate students; and he saw that the library acquired unusually good resources for the study of North American history and culture. (He had a vast knowledge of film, and was well-read in contemporary fiction.) He encouraged the faculty to introduce an 'Early Leavers' scheme, to enable people who had not matriculated to enter university, which was subsequently adopted by other institutions. At the same time, he was active in the Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association, and served as chair of the Victorian Fulbright Selection Committee. Together with his ever-growing reputation as an historian of the modern American South, this work contributed largely to the national and international reputation of La Trobe's History Department in the 1980s and 1990s.

Salmond also played a leading role in the university's administrative work. As well as serving on numerous committees, he was at various times Head of the History Department, Dean of the Faculty, Deputy-Chair of the Academic Board, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Acting Vice-Chancellor.

John Salmond's academic achievements were recognised by a series of awards and prizes, including American Council of Learned Societies fellowships; the Gustavus Myers Centre for the Study of Human Rights in the United States Award in 1990; election to the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1993; and D.Litt. (*honoris causa*) from La Trobe University.

As well as in history, John Salmond was keenly interested in travel, cricket, rugby, AFL football, the spring Racing Carnival and conviviality. In order to renew links with distant cousins, he visited Scotland repeatedly; and he meandered about the United States, as interested in Elvis and spare ribs as in old textile mills. His acquaintance with New Zealanders, both notable and obscure, was legendary. (One of his favourite memories was having known Ray Robinson in the slaughter works, whom Bradman said was a better cricketer than he.)

John Salmond was a wonderful story-teller, whether of the American South or of the vagaries of the life he loved so hugely. He is sadly missed by his children, grandchildren and many friends.

ALAN FROST FAHA FRHistS