



JACOB SMIT

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1908-1982

Jacob Smit, Emeritus Professor of Dutch and Germanic Philology in the University of Melbourne, died suddenly on 29 September 1982 at the age of 74. He was elected to the Australian Humanities Research Council in 1960 and became a Foundation Fellow of the Academy ten years later. Jaap Smit, as he was known to his colleagues and friends, was born at Lekkerkerk in the Netherlands in 1908. He received his secondary education in Amersfoort and studied, from 1925 to 1931, Dutch Literature, Germanic Philology and Dutch History at the University of Utrecht. He was awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters *cum laude* for a thesis on the style of Everardus Potgieter (1808-1875) in 1937. From 1932 he taught in Secondary Schools first at Goes, then at Zwolle, a career in which he distinguished himself although it was interrupted briefly in 1943 through the vicissitudes of Nazi occupation. When in 1947 the University of Melbourne established a lectureship in Dutch Language and Literature for pass and honours students within the School of Germanic Languages (later Germanic Studies), Smit was appointed to it on the strong recommendation of Professor Boyce Gibson who had met him at the request of the Selection Committee. He arrived in Melbourne with his family at the beginning of the academic year 1949. During his 25 years of office Jaap Smit developed Dutch Studies to such a high standard that his section was considered by the Netherlands' Ministry of Education as the best centre of Dutch Studies outside Holland and Belgium. Jaap Smit combined the qualities of a highly dedicated teacher with a flair for administration which resulted in constant care for his students and staff, and with a gift for meticulous yet wide ranging scholarship. His many publications earned him a respected place in international Germanic Studies and, naturally, also in the country of his birth. The University of Melbourne recognised his academic qualities by appointing him, in 1965, to a Personal Chair in Dutch and Germanic Philology which he occupied for eight years.

Smit's special interests lay in linguistics and biography. In linguistics he published a number of papers, including together with his former Melbourne colleague Dr Rein Meijer a *Dutch Grammar and Reader* (1959) which found its way into courses in Dutch all over the English speaking world. In biography, his lives of E. J. Potgieter (1950), a poet and versatile writer of the late Romantic age, and of Constantijn Huygens (1980), a prolific poet, but also an accomplished diplomat of the seventeenth century, were outstanding successes. A third major biography, on Conrad Busken Huet, art historian and prolific essayist who had one renowned novel to his credit, was half finished at the

time of Smit's death. Smit described Huet as a 'volcanic force' in his last publication which he saw before he died, an informative essay on the 'hurdles and snares facing a biographer' (in *New Found Land*, August 1982, pp. 23-28).

Jaap Smit was a reticent man who would closely observe first before he would respond to his fellow men – perhaps the hard years of the war made him so. But once he had abandoned his reserve, he was a warm friend and a loyal colleague and co-worker. His courage in personal misadventure was matched by a dry humour reflected in a most engaging smile. His absolute integrity radiated through everything he did. He greatly enjoyed music – he was an accomplished pianist – and family life, and it was a tremendous joy to him that only a few weeks before his death his whole family, seventeen of them, had come together to celebrate Mrs Smit's 75th birthday on an island in the Barrier Reef. He also played a leading part in the Dutch community in Victoria, having been the first President of the 'Association of Netherland Societies'.

Professor Smit was a corresponding member of the Royal Dutch Academy of the Sciences and the Arts, and Her Majesty Queen Juliana conferred on him a Knighthood in the Order of Orange Nassau in 1957.

R. H. Samuel