



Oskar Spate
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Oskar Hermann Khristian Spate (1911–2000)

Oskar Spate was one of the most distinctive characters of the Coombs building, as well as a formative influence on the Research School of Pacific Studies. As the School's first Professor of Geography, he brought a wealth of experience which was extraordinary even in that time and in that company hand-picked by Raymond Firth. The poetry, pipe and tweeds of an English don belied the fact that his parents met as Salvation Army campers, and that Cambridge had radicalised him enough—despite his First and PhD—to jeopardise a conventional British academic career. Despatched to Rangoon in the hope of making him more conservative, his teaching and research there were interrupted (almost fatally) by a Japanese air raid, and diverted (via long recuperation and a stint in censorship) to the Topographical Department of Southeast Asia Command. He had also served on the Punjab Boundary Commission, and risen to a Readership at LSE, before he reached Canberra in 1951, nearing his scholarly prime at the age of 40. His moods ranged from crusty to affectionate, but he was always concerned, and his views were always expressed with wit and acumen.

In the fledgling ANU his delight in poetry revived, to enliven his correspondence and give grace and precision to his prose. He retained a social conscience although his links to the Salvation Army had waned, and radical political values although his Marxism mellowed to social democracy. The Department which he created was, by design, intellectually diverse, and as each strand developed, it split in two—Human Geography, and Biogeography and Geomorphology. Oskar's generation was the last to encompass such a range of disciplines. He could describe himself equally well as an economic geographer, an historical geographer, or a literary historian, but these terms miss the point: he was comfortable in all the social sciences and humanities, and used all their insights in his work. After a term as Director of the School (1967-72) he felt that Geography had left him behind, so he moved to the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, where he researched and published his last large project.

Oskar's greatest monument in the literature of Geography was *India and Pakistan* (1954) an epic work of observation, analysis and synthesis on a sub-continental scale which earned prizes in France and India. In History, his *Pacific Since Magellan* trilogy (1979, 1983, 1988) is a work on a similarly grand scale. Each—like every other Spate publication—is marked by clarity, charm and insight matching its ambition. He also described himself as a minor poet. Inspiring generations of scholars in every continent, the impact of his books is even wider than his direct influence on his students and colleagues.

He found time to become a pioneer in academic consultancy. Without compromising his youthful anti-imperialism, he advised the Australian government on the economic and political development of Papua New Guinea, and the British government on the problems and opportunities of Fiji. In Fiji his extensive travels and intensive enquiries produced a major report—published as *The Fijian People* (1959)—whose advice would have loosened the bonds of a quasi-traditional order, and might have averted the country's later calamities.

Happily, some of his judicious advice was better received. He was an influential member of the Currie Commission which recommended the creation, location, structure and shape of the University of Papua New Guinea. He was less conspicuous but also influential in the emergence of the University of the South Pacific in Suva, and the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now the University of Canberra) nearer home.

As well as the prizes awarded to *India and Pakistan*, Oskar was an Honorary Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences and a recipient of the Laureat D'Honneur of the International Geographical Union and honorary doctorates from ANU and UPNG. At least as important is the affection in which he is held by those who knew him at the height of his powers and in his years of physical decline. He outlived his wives, Daphne and Browning. He is survived by his and Daphne's children Virginia, Andrew and Alistair, and by a host of admirers and friends.

Donald Denoon