



Michael Spencer

MICHAEL SPENCER

1936-1990

Michael Spencer was born in Peterborough, U.K., in 1936. He took a BA with first class honours at Sheffield in 1959, an MA at Cambridge in 1962, and a D. Phil at Oxford in 1964. From 1962 to 1968, he was a Fellow in Modern Languages at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. In 1969, he came to Australia to take up a position as Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Adelaide. From there, he was drawn to Australia's most active and innovative French department of the early seventies, Monash. His D. Phil. thesis had been on the art criticism of Théophile Gautier, but he had already turned towards fields of study which provided a different kind of challenge. The French nouveau critique attracted him very early. While others, especially Anglo-Saxon scholars, were still unconfident about entering into ways of talking and thinking which questioned some of their most basic assumptions, Michael Spencer was developing a genuine expertise, especially on the writings of Michel Butor, which allowed him to move into a position of great prominence.

In 1974, he went to the University of Queensland as Professor of French and Head of Department. The very fact of his appointment was a sign that the department (or at least some of its younger members) was ready for change and for a more sustained intellectual challenge. Fortunately for the department, Michael Spencer was head during the Whitlam years, and was able to oversee a series of appointments. This was an area in which he absolutely excelled. Not only did he have a keen, accurate sense of scholarly strength, but he also had the modesty needed to support young scholars who, by their ebullient activity, might have seemed threatening, or at least uncomfortable, colleagues. Intellectual comfort was not one of Michael Spencer's concerns.

Around 1980, at a time when others might have been content, so to speak, to allow their career to develop of its own accord, Michael Spencer struck out in a new direction. His involvement with a course on New Caledonian culture led him into the detailed study of the modern political history of the French territory. He came, in a typically courageous and outspoken way, to occupy a position on New Caledonian independence which was not the most obviously diplomatic one for the head of a French department. This may indeed have cost him certain kinds of formal recognition, but he was not to be swayed by such considerations. When the University of Queensland, through its Senate, conferred an honorary doctorate of laws on a prominent politician not reputed for his respect of law, Michael Spencer was one of the most vigorous critics of the Senate.

Election to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, in 1984, brought him very great satisfaction. This honour, unlike some others, was one he valued enormously, precisely because it bore the stamp of collegiality. For one who, throughout his career in Australia, had

practised collegiality of the most exigent and dynamic sort, it was, as he quietly confessed to one or two friends, the high point of his career.
His death leaves a great gap in French studies, and in the lives of his colleagues and friends.

Peter Cryle