

Peter James Bicknell (1938–2001)

Peter Bicknell prematurely departed this life, but was sent forth well-prepared on his final journey. Not only was the Ferryman's toll placed beneath his tongue but his grave-goods included: for intellectual support, his spectacles, pen and an index card; for bodily sustenance a bottle of merlot and a box of favourite chocolates (with some Quickeze *en cas d'urgence*); for remembrance of his origins, the key to his childhood home. Thus was encapsulated Bicknell the scholar, Bicknell the bon vivant, and Bicknell the family man. His untimely death on 10 June 2001, and that of Kevin Lee a few days before, deprived with a double blow this Academy and Australian Classics of two talented and well-loved figures.

Peter James Bicknell was born, in London, on 13 January 1938. A brilliant student, he took the inevitable 'first' at University College, London in 1958, and moved directly — seamlessly, as they say these days — to a tenured lectureship at the University of Natal in 1959. It was unlikely, of course, that a man of his principles and his interest in politics ancient and modern would rest easily in the political climate of South Africa at that period, and he was soon to move continents again, this time to Australia, to join first the University of Tasmania in 1962, and then, in 1966, the infant Department of Classical Studies at Monash University (the 'last of the old universities'). He was to remain there, as senior lecturer and later as reader, for the rest of his career.

At Monash Peter was above all a teacher and a scholar; administration he could do — what intelligent academic can not? — but it was with his discipline and his students that he felt most engaged. Peter as a teacher endeared himself to generations of students; he was concerned for them, he was their friend. Undergraduates were inspired by his inimitable lectures; postgraduates owed an infinite debt to the fertility of his ideas and to his inexhaustible patience. There was virtually no topic beyond the ken and competence of PJB. Likewise, he was a much sought-after examiner of theses: be it mental illness in the ancient world or Galen's *de Alimentorum Facultatibus*, Bicknell was your man.

Peter as a scholar was an example to us all. Not only did he publish in virtually every area of his own discipline: history, literature, philosophy, archaeology; he also somehow found the time and energy (he never needed to be pushed) to master sufficiently specialist areas such as astronomy and vulcanology, not to mention his fascination with UFOs, out-of-body experiences, the para-normal and reflexology. In an interdisciplinary collaboration with his Monash colleagues Joe Monaghan and Ray Cass he had made a substantial contribution to a study of the effects on the Minoan civilization of Crete of the Late Bronze Age eruption of the Thera (Santorini) volcano, and at the time of his death was similarly involved with a project relating to the effects in the northern hemisphere of the second century Taupo super-eruption in New Zealand. His learning was duly, and rightly, recognised, not only in 1989 by the Australian Academy of the Humanities, but also, to his great delight and pride, by election to the Fellowship

of the Royal Astronomical Society. A personal chair eluded him, but more as a result of shifting academic priorities at Monash than of any inadequacy in his candidature.

In company Peter could appear serious and withdrawn. However, this surface reserve merely hid the warm and generous personality underneath, which could be ignited in an instant like a flash of summer sunlight. Peter could be awkward and difficult; he could also be thoughtful and constructive. What was important for him was the advancement and preservation of his discipline in particular and scholarship in general.

Peter's family, in all its intricacies, was important to him. His interest in genealogy and prosopography came through in his annual Christmas card, which conveyed his family's greetings via a carefully constructed stemma to reflect the descent of John, his son by his first wife Aileen; Justin, Jeremy and Kristen the children of Karin, his second wife; and his and Karin's daughter Emma. There was pride in his children, and joy in his grandchildren, the latest of which arrived just two week's after Peter's death.

Over the last generation academia has witnessed the unedifying spectacle of vice-chancellors no longer wedded to their institution but ever on the look-out for a step higher on what is now seen as a mere promotion ladder for CEOs who embrace a philosophy which puts numbers and balance-sheets far ahead of quality and scholarship. These CEOs are aided and abetted by a motley array of Deans and the like, whose sole purpose is to put their masters' edicts into operation. In such circumstances Classics at Monash is no more, and now Peter Bicknell is no longer amongst us. Australian intellectual life is sadly diminished and very much the poorer.

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