HUGH ANDERSON FRHSV FAHA

1927–2017

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Among the first activities of the progenitor of this Academy, the Australian Humanities Research Council, upon its formation in 1956 was a survey of the state of the humanities. *The Humanities in Australia* appeared in 1958 with a selective bibliography listing the principal publications in the humanities disciplines. The list for English noted the early work of academics such as Bob Brissenden, Vin Buckley, Brian Elliott, Alec Hope, Leonie Kramer and Colin Roderick, as well as the contributions of S.J. Baker, H.M. Green and the Palmers. It also recorded a dozen publications by Hugh Anderson on bush ballads and colonial broadsides as well as studies of Frank Wilmot and Shaw Neilson. Aged just thirty, Hugh was then a primary school teacher living at the bayside Melbourne suburb of Mordialloc. He would continue to work in the Victorian Education Department until retirement in 1982, producing a remarkable body of literary and historical scholarship and authorship of more than twenty school textbooks alongside professional duties. He wrote unremittingly, at night, weekends and during holidays – and he wrote with a purpose.

Hugh joined the Communist Party in 1943, aged sixteen, and became a member of the Realist Writers group in Melbourne. His interests proved too heterodox for the Communist Party, for he formed associations with writers such as P.R. Stephensen and Bruce Muirden, but he continued to work with the literary left and contributed to the first issue of *Overland*. His ASIO file notes membership of two Communist 'front' organisations, the Australasian Book Society and – more dubiously – the Fellowship of Australian Writers. With his wife Dawn he is also recorded as an activist in the peace movement.

Friendships with Alan Marshall and Andrew Fabinyi were also black marks, but they were only part of a larger circle that extended from Bernard O'Dowd and E.J. Brady to Frank Hardy, Stephen Murray-Smith and Ian Turner. Contemporaries in the promotion of a radical nationalist folk culture and literary tradition during the post-war era included include John Manifold, Russel Ward, Edgar Waters and especially Hugh's collaborator John Meredith. Hugh's contribution extended to bibliographical compilations, annotated editions and a major publishing venture. He was the last of that generation.

Hugh Anderson was born on 21 January 1927 in the central Victorian township of Elmore, 50 kilometres northeast of Bendigo on the Campaspe River. The Andersons had farming and professional connections, but his father's boot-shop struggled with the onset of the Depression and his mother had to take up work in the local post office. The family had strong Presbyterian convictions and Hugh's two brothers attended Bendigo High School (one became a professor of education at Monash) but Hugh was good with his hands and sent to the Bendigo School of Mines – it was a teacher there who introduced him to literature, music and socialism. A pacifist, he served in the last months of the war as a surveyor in the Victorian Forestry Commission. Upon its completion he enrolled in the Bendigo Teachers College and soon transferred to the Melbourne Teachers College, alongside the University, where the Labor Club was also strong. It was there that he met Dawn Main, an author in her own right who shared so many of his interests and assisted in many of his projects. Upon graduating Hugh embarked on a part time B.A. in English, but was already teaching in a primary school and found little in the course that served his needs. He remained a primary school teacher until 1963 and thereafter was a principal, with a three-year spell in the 1970s assisting Les Blake produce a mammoth history of the Department.

His work on ballads and broadsides was foundational. An edition of *Colonial Ballads* appeared in 1955, and was reprinted here and in the United States, while *Botany Bay Broadsides* appeared in 1956, both anticipating Russel Ward's seminal *The Australian Legend*. Given his connection to the Victorian goldfields, it was hardly surprising that Hugh paid particular attention to their literature with an early edition of Charles Thatcher's songs and an important edition of parliamentary papers on Eureka. His interest in O'Dowd extended to a compilation from the socialist newspaper *Tocsin* on the radical arguments against Federation, and there were biographies of John Pascoe Fawkner (dedicated to his School of Mines teacher, Spencer Lake) and the Melbourne criminal, Squizzy Taylor. As he explained, in the early years of television there were American crime serials such as *The Untouchables*, and he remembered asking with nationalist fervour: 'if we want crooks, why not Australian ones?'.

He also wrote a biography of Shaw Neilson with Les Blake and contributed more than a dozen entries to the Australian Dictionary of Biography – the last of them on that most unyielding of all communists, Ted Hill. From the late 1960s he undertook commissioned local histories. Then there were articles and shorter pieces for the *Bulletin*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly* and *Overland* as well as the *Victorian Historical Journal*. He served as vice-president of the Royal Victorian Historical Society and was made a fellow for his services in 1974. From 1976 until 1989 he was also on the management committee of the Australian Society of Authors.

Throughout his employment by the Department of Education, Hugh relied on grants from the Literature Council and then the Literature and Music Boards of the Australia Council to support his extensive archival research. Upon retirement in 1982 he became a full-time independent historian, with visiting posts at James Cook University and the Folklore Department of the University of Pennsylvania. From 1985 he chaired the Committee of Inquiry into Folklife in Australia, which consulted widely in preparing its ambitious report *Folklife: Our Living Heritage* (1987). Though the Australian government failed to respond to some of the recommendations, it led in 1988 to the formation of the Australian Folklore Association. Hugh became a member of the editorial committee and a major contributor to its journal, *Australian Folklore*; he also wrote for its British and American counterparts.

His other principal commitment was publishing. In 1979 he founded Red Rooster Press, its name taken from the convict bard 'Frank the Poet': 'While I live, I'll crow'. Red Rooster published new work, including the vast historical survey by the veteran communist Ralph Gibson, as well as fresh editions or reprints of his own and others' publications, including Duke Tritton's *Time Means Tucker*, and there was also a compilation of Chinese literature, an interest sparked by a tour of that country in 1981 with two other writers, Nicholas Hasluck and Christopher Koch.

Hugh Anderson had long been an independent scholar with the ability and confidence to steer his own course. He did not isolate himself from other scholars and after he became a fellow of the Australian Centre at the University of Melbourne in 1995 was active at conferences here and overseas. His approach to literature was consistently historical and biographical, attentive to milieu and circumstances. He wore his learning lightly, building on initial interests and repeatedly taking up new ones. He was recognised by the University of Melbourne in 2008 with the award of an honorary Doctorate of Letters and elected an Honorary Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2011.

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With assistance from Warwick Anderson and Frank Bongiorno