

# BRUCE EDGAR MANSFIELD AM FAHA

1926–2017



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

**B**ruce Mansfield was a significant figure in the development of history in Australia, a pioneer in the teaching of early modern European history, and a strong contributor to university administration. He was renowned for his dedication to teaching, and much of his scholarly life and engagement with various community organisations was informed by his understanding of the relationship between history and his Christian faith. He became internationally known as a preeminent scholar of the work and historical reception of the Dutch humanist, Desiderius Erasmus, and one of his important legacies was his founding of the *Journal of Religious History*.

Bruce was born in Brisbane in 1926. The family moved to Sydney in 1938, where he attended Knox Grammar School in Wahroonga, of which he was later to write a history. Even as a child he seems to have had an interest in history and current affairs, possibly stimulated by his father's travels to Europe, as the manager of a millinery and haberdashery department of an importing firm. He enrolled in History at the University of Sydney in 1944, completing his BA in 1946, and graduating with First Class Honours and the University Medal in History in 1949.

Between Bruce's Pass and Honours year, 1947 was a year which influenced the rest of his life. In 2012 he wrote what he called a memoir – *Summer is Almost Over* – and it is significant that he begins it with the experience of that post-war year when he travelled to Oslo for the second World Conference of Christian Youth, as a representative of the Presbyterian Fellowship Union and church youth in the Australian delegation. The impact of post-war crisis and a decimated Europe was potent, political and theological divisions stark, discussion on social democracy, totalitarianism, resistance and theology bracing and also unsettling. Travel to Sweden, London and Switzerland consolidated such mixed feelings. Yet he was making numerous international contacts and seeing himself as part of a large international discussion concerning history, politics and faith.

While writing his MA on 'Australian Nationalism in the Growth of the Labour Movement in the 1880s' at Sydney on return, Bruce was also a temporary lecturer. After the MA's completion in 1951, he was appointed Lecturer in History in 1952, Senior Lecturer in 1958, and Associate Professor in 1964. Bruce saw his MA research as a step towards what he called 'history of ideas' or 'ideological history', away from the international or geopolitical history primarily taught in the Sydney department. The gap in subjects on offer between the one first-year subject in Ancient History and later modern European History subjects, allowed Bruce to move in the direction of his history of ideas in 1952, when he established a subject called 'Renaissance and Reformation', later to become 'Early Modern History', for which the recent arrival in the department, A.G.L. Shaw, taught the sections on Britain.

This subject marked the beginning of Bruce Mansfield becoming a Reformation historian. An autodidact, as he described himself, his training and research had been in Australian history, with some teaching in modern European. But now he began learning German and gathering together the limited source materials available. Because of limited sources, and his view of history as a conversation between past and present, his tendency was to concentrate on historiography; but as various students commented, an integral part of the tutorial teaching he introduced in 1958 focused on the source extracts he gathered and cyclostyled for each student. His lectures are remembered by former students Ros Pesman and

Bob Scribner (to become leading historians of early modern Europe themselves), as well as by Clive James and many others, as extremely memorable, powerful and authoritative performances, masterly in the way they condensed information.

Bruce's teaching, and increasingly his research, pushed him in the direction of theology, and especially the work of Reinhold Niebuhr on evil and crisis, an interest stimulated by his Oslo experience and also by his conviction that the Reformation could only be understood through doctrine. Yet his theology was not divorced from the broader religious experience and the sixteenth-century social and cultural context. In the late 1950s he discovered the essays on the Reformation of the French historian and founder of the *Annales* journal and 'School', Lucien Febvre (on whom he published his first article in *Early Modern European studies* in 1960). This moved him decisively from a traditional ecclesiastical and political history of the Reformation to one that included under religious history psychological and anthropological questions about religious sentiment and desire, aspiration and intensity of feeling – which Febvre characterized as 'the immense appetite for the divine' in sixteenth-century Europe.

In 1965 Bruce was appointed Foundation Professor of History at Macquarie University and Head of the School of History, Philosophy and Politics. He devoted much of the next decade to University affairs and administration, bedding down the new History discipline (the largest in Australia by 1976), the new School, and the new University. This was also the period of student unrest and staff conflict, experiences which somewhat soured Bruce's view of the University. But as a strong believer in teaching, much of his energies went into structuring the curriculum. He established his early modern history subject, now called 'The West in Early Modern Times' as the foundation subject in first year, on the grounds that the Reformation was a historical watershed from which students could work back into medieval and ancient times or forward into the modern. The subject was a huge success, enrolling over 700 students by the mid 1970s. Bruce also ran a compulsory unit in fourth year on 'Ideas and Institutions in the Sixteenth Century'. In 1976, however, his teaching took a step sideways when he was appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), a position he held for the next ten years.

Study leave in Yale in 1965, where Bruce had Roland Bainton as something of a mentor, involved the early concrete steps in what he was to call the major project of his life, his study of the history of Erasmian thought. His research project at Yale was to explore nineteenth-century writings on Erasmus by Protestants, Catholics and agnostics, and this was later published in two articles, in the 1967 *Journal of Religious History* (which he had founded in 1959) and in the 1968 *Studies in the*

*Renaissance*, published by the Renaissance Society of America. On the basis of the latter article, the Canadian scholar of Erasmian humanism James McConica, then at the University of Toronto, recommended Bruce to the University of Toronto Press, when they raised the idea of publishing a long history of Erasmian reception and criticism. The offer came from the press in 1971 and Mansfield jumped at the opportunity, researching and publishing his trilogy over the next three decades.

1974 was spent on leave, working on the Erasmus project, primarily in Toronto and London, with short stays in the US and an Erasmus 'pilgrimage' in the Netherlands. The first volume, *Erasmus 1550–2000, The Phoenix of His Age: Interpretations of Erasmus c.1150–1750*, appeared in 1979, when Bruce was well into his term as Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Macquarie. The reviews were almost all extremely positive, pointing to the ways his work had surpassed the earlier similar German work by Andreas Flitner, praising its solid scholarship and discerning judgements, and most importantly, expressing excitement about the subsequent volume. As President of the Australian Historical Association from 1977 to 1979, Bruce attended the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Bucharest in 1980 and used the opportunity to begin work on the second volume in the British Library. But progress proved slow, primarily because of his necessary involvement in various internal conflicts at Macquarie in the 1980s. He was somewhat depressed by these events, wanted to move on with his research, and so decided to take early retirement at the age of 60 in early 1986. But writing was again delayed by his appointment as Chairman of the Interim Police Education and Training Advisory Council in late 1985, and then of the ongoing Council 1987–95, established to transform police education in NSW.

The second Erasmus volume, *Man on His Own: Interpretations of Erasmus c. 1750–1920*, was published in 1992, once again followed by excellent reviews and calls for another sequel to cover the twentieth century. Bruce provided that sequel in 2003, *Erasmus in the Twentieth Century c.1920–2000*, a volume structured differently to the previous two, not endeavouring to be comprehensive, but focusing on key themes in recent Erasmus scholarship and three prominent commemorations of the scholar's work. By this time Bruce had been back at the University of Sydney, first as a Visiting Professor for six years from 1986, co-teaching an Honours seminar each year, initially with his former tutor and then senior member of the Department, Ros Pesman; and from 1992 as an Honorary Associate. He had also co-written a history of Macquarie University with Mark Hutchinson, *Liberality of Opportunity; A History of Macquarie University 1964–89*, which appeared in 1992; was Chairman of the Council of Mitchell College of Advanced Education at Bathurst as it prepared to become part of the multi-campus Charles

Sturt University in 1989; and became Deputy Chancellor of the new university from 1989 to 1992.

Bruce Mansfield left one further significant legacy to Australian historical scholarship, his founding of the *Journal of Religious History* in 1959, of which he was the editor from 1959 to 1987. We easily forget the huge practical challenges of such an enterprise back in the 1960s. The journal's aim was also an intellectual challenge. Inspired by the work of Lucien Febvre, Mansfield proclaimed in the Foreword to the first issue that religion (just as culture or science) should not be considered simply as an appendix to politics. Its cultural power needs to be recognised in collective and individual lives; this was not to be a journal of institutional or ecclesiastical history. The aims Bruce set were not fully achieved; but the journal has been remarkably successful, moving from two to three and (from 2007) to four issues annually, publishing studies of great significance. And in line with Bruce's original aims, the journal has succeeded in creating a new intellectual community through the association which hosts the journal.

I was aware of Bruce Mansfield's early work on Erasmus as an undergraduate in the late 1960s. After I returned to Australia after graduate study in the mid-70s, Bruce was fully involved as DVC at Macquarie. But by the late 1970s and 80s, we met more often, drawn together by our common interest in Northern humanism, and also through Bob Scribner, Bruce's star student who was to become one of the leading and most creative of

Reformation historians, and who had also become a close friend and colleague of mine. I was always struck by Bruce's intellectual interest and immense generosity towards young colleagues such as myself. He was unassuming, patient, gentle, willing to listen to alternative views, yet firm in mounting his own arguments. He was clearly respected by most of his colleagues and strongly committed to the liberal humanist values he often referred to in his writing. He believed deeply in teaching as well as University service, what he frequently referred to as 'vocation'. I sensed too his love of the Australian bush, only reading much later of his intense enjoyment of nature when travelling in Europe and North America.

In 1991 the University of Sydney awarded Bruce Mansfield the degree of Doctor of Literature *honoris causa* for contributions as a scholar, administrator and teacher at the universities of Sydney, Macquarie, and Charles Sturt. In 1992 Macquarie University also awarded him a Doctor of Literature *honoris causa* and in 1995 Charles Sturt University awarded him a Doctor of the University *honoris causa*. In 2005 he received the History Council of NSW's Annual History Citation; and in 2009 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM).

Bruce is survived by his wife Joan, his brother Garth and their families. Australian universities and historians, and especially early modern historians and historians of religion, have much to thank Bruce Mansfield for.

CHARLES ZIKA FAHA