



Sir (William) Keith Hancock

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1898-1988

Emeritus Professor W.K. (Sir Keith) Hancock, the first President of the Academy of the Humanities, died on 13 August 1988, aged ninety. He was born in Melbourne, the son of Arch-deacon William Hancock and his wife Elizabeth (née McCrae). Melbourne Grammar and Melbourne University led to a Rhodes Scholarship and Oxford, where he was elected a Fellow of All Souls in 1924. From 1924 to 1933 he was Professor of History at Adelaide. In 1934 he was appointed Professor of History at Birmingham University, and in 1944 moved to Oxford as Chichele Professor of Economic History. In 1949 he became the founding Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and Professor of British Commonwealth Affairs in the University of London, and in 1957 he was appointed Director of the Research School of Social Sciences and Professor of History in the Australian National University. He resigned the Directorship in 1961 and retired from his Chair in 1965, but maintained his close relationship with the University as Visiting Fellow and Honorary Fellow until his death.

As an historian he was remarkable for the wide range of his creative activities. His first book was a study of the Risorgimento; his second, *Australia*, was a brilliant essay of interpretation of the history of his native land. His last two seminar papers, delivered not long before his death, were on Leonardo da Vinci and the salination of the Murray River. In between he had ranged over the British Commonwealth, Britain during World War II, Africa, Australia, autobiography and political theory. His most important publications were: *Ricasoli and the Risorgimento* (1926); *Australia* (1930); *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs* (1937, 1940 and 1942); *Politics in Pitcairn* (1947); *British War Economy* (with M.M. Gowing, 1949); *Country and Calling* (1954); *War and Peace in this Century* (1961); *Smuts: The Sanguine Years, 1870-1919*, Vol 1. (1962); *Smuts: The Fields of Force, 1919-50*, Vol II. (1968); *Discovering Monaro* (1972); *Professing History* (1976); *Perspective in History* (1982); *Testimony* (1985).

The honours were many: knighted in 1953, he was elevated to KBE in 1965. He was a Fellow of the British Academy, and Foreign Honorary Member of the American Historical Association and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He received the Order of Merit of the Republic of Italy. Nine universities, Rhodes, Cambridge, Birmingham, Oxford, Cape Town, Melbourne, the Australian National University, Adelaide, and Western Australia, awarded him Honorary Doctorates. He wore the honours lightly.

The bare record of appointments, publications and honours is impressive enough, but the quality of his achievement in even more so. He said of himself that "my main concern as a student, teacher and writer of history had been with a cluster of closely related problems – war and peace; Machiavellian politics and Grotian law; imperial rule and its violent or non-violent enemies; racial and national conflict; the theory and emergent practice of *civitas maxima*, that so much desired community of mankind which tarries so long in its coming".

He was driven by a moral impulse which found expression in his work as a rare mixture of science and art.

He vehemently rejected C.P. Snow's notion of the two cultures, both in theory and in practice. His massive studies of the British Commonwealth dig below the political and legal surface of the problem he was examining into its social, racial and economic dimensions. His massive biography of Smuts combines the meticulous scholarship of the scientific historian with the creative imagination of the novelist. In his small but influential local history, *Discovering Monaro*, he used the evidence not only from historical documents but also from archaeology, anthropology, botany and zoology, and he looked at the landscape with the eye of a poet.

The thirty volume Civil History of Britain in the Second World War, of which he was the General Editor and the author, with Margaret Gowing, of the first volume, is a tribute both to his scholarship and to his capacity for adventurous leadership. About twenty years ago he said to me, "if you write my obituary I want you to say I found Titmuss". Richard Titmuss had left school at the age of fifteen, worked in industry and commerce, and, without benefit of university, began in 1938 to publish work on the condition of the British people. Hancock selected him to write the volume on social policy. In the same year that it was published, 1950, Titmuss was appointed to the Chair of Social Administration in the University of London, a position which he held with great distinction until his death in 1973. Titmuss was only one of the great talents that Hancock "discovered". Margaret Gowing started as his assistant on the war histories, and moved on to be Professor of the History of Science at Oxford with the rare double distinctions of Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Society. Anthony Low joined him in Canberra, first as a Fellow in History and later as Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, before becoming Smuts Professor of the History of the British Commonwealth at Cambridge. Hancock was also remarkably successful in attracting people of established reputation to work with him. For example, the authors of the war histories included such distinguished names as Postan, Court, Behrens and Wrigley, to name only a few.

Hancock saw history as the elucidation of problems rather than as the study of a period. To this task he believed the historian should bring what he called "attachment, justice and span". What he meant by this he elaborated in his own historical writing and in his ruminations on the nature of his craft. "Attachment" he used in contrast to "detachment": historians, he believed, were bound to take sides on issues of intellectual and moral valuation. By the same token "value-free social science" was a chimera. By "justice" he meant attempting to see all sides of a problem before reaching a conclusion - attachment must not become bias. "Span" was perspective, the capacity to see a problem in a large historical or intellectual context. It was from this vantage point that he was critical of many aspects of the profession of history in our day. He spoke nostalgically of the days in which historians took the whole world as their oyster, and contrasted them with the present in which the PhD, with its narrow compass, held sway.

"Thinking and doing" was the way he described his activities outside the

study, from humping a rucksack through the high mountains to planning a university. From 1945 to 1949 he played an important part, as one of the group of four academic advisers on the establishment of the Australian National University, in planning the new university. His contribution was a bundle of ideas to be developed as the university grew, rather than a fully developed scheme. This was typical of his thinking - start small and grow as the need arises, rather than starting with a grandiose plan. He dropped out of the planning in 1949 as a result of disagreements with the Interim Council, but returned in 1957 as Director of the Research School of Social Sciences. Start small was again the principle which guided him in transforming the preliminary work of L.F. Fitzhardinge into the project which produced the highly successful *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. In retrospect he thought, probably correctly, that he had started too small. One of the achievements of which he was proudest was the constitutional mission that he led to Uganda in 1954. By winning the trust and respect of both sides, he secured an agreement between the colonial government and the indigenous people, against all the odds.

Hancock continued into his old age to think and do. For two years he brought all his love of the land and his passionate belief in the need to preserve the environment into the battle to prevent what he, and many others, saw as the desecration of one of the important natural features of Canberra, a city which he had come to love, but the offending tower on Canberra's Black Mountain was built in spite of his efforts, and affronted him to the end. A great deal of his life's work had been concerned with understanding the nature of nationalism. In his last years he was deeply offended by the extent to which a succession of governments had surrendered to the United States vital elements of Australian sovereignty. The argument was stated most clearly in his last book, *Testimony*. A slightly detached but profound interest in the Christian religion, informed by lifelong study of the Bible and the Prayer Book, remained with him to his last days.

He was a many-sided man. Capable of extraordinary powers of concentration, he pursued whatever his immediate objectives were with ruthless determination. But he was always prepared to put his own concerns aside to take a sympathetic interest in the work or problems of others. Students could depend on him for searching criticism of their work, but equally he would find what was positive in what they had done. He was not one for putting people down. Whimsicality, puckish humour, total recall of events and ideas, and a warm interest in others are the personal qualities that those of us who worked and played with him, at picnic cricket or scrambling up a mountain, will remember.

He married in 1926 Theaden Brockelbank, a fellow student at Melbourne, who died in 1960. In 1961 he married Marjorie Eyre, who had worked with him on the war histories, at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and at the Australian National University, who survives him. There were no children of either marriage.

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