



John Bowman
(1916–2006)

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John Bowman, a Foundation Fellow, who died on 8 May 2006, four days short of his ninetieth birthday, played a crucial role in promoting the study of the Middle East in Australia. His unwavering commitment to scholarship combined with a deep affection for Australia, his adopted home and a personal generosity, transformed a broad field of study that had barely taken root in the Antipodes. At the University of Melbourne, the Middle East was part of a package of programmes in Asian studies that were supported in the 1950s and 1960s.

John was born in Ayr, Scotland, into a devout Presbyterian family, who encouraged his studies and early interest in the Bible. Although he was a sickly child, contracting a form of tuberculosis from drinking unpasteurised milk, he was a bright student with a gift for languages. Educated at Ayr Academy, he completed the demanding ancient Greek syllabus in one year, winning several medals in Classics, before moving to Glasgow University, where he read ancient languages and Biblical Studies and was honoured with the Orientalist Prize. He furthered his studies at Balliol College, University of Oxford and was awarded his Doctorate in 1945 for *The Pharisees: A Critical Investigation*. While at Oxford he met and married Margaret Stanton. Subsequently, in 1947, John was appointed to the Department of Semitic Studies at Leeds University, where he developed his reputation as a serious scholar and gradually rose to Head of Department.

But it was not until John was appointed, in 1959, to the Chair of Semitic Studies at the University of Melbourne that his standing as scholar matured. In the days when air travel was limited and expensive and international communications were restricted, a delegate at the Commonwealth secretariat in London interviewed him for the position. Bristling with enthusiasm and determination, he relished the opportunities that Australia would bring. But moving was a major undertaking. Seven children, an extensive library and a house full of furniture were loaded on the P&O liner *The Himalaya*, which damaged a propeller at the Suez Canal, adding to the ordeal. And the landing at Fremantle was no less chaotic. Nevertheless the journey to Australia did little to dent his fondness of Australia and in 1961 John applied for citizenship.

Well before mission statements and strategic plans, John moved quickly and with a singular focus to develop his department as a centre to advance the understanding of Middle Eastern culture and civilisation, ancient and modern, in ways that were locally, nationally and internationally significant. According to the 1959 annual report of the academic board, John tackled his brief with 'missionary zeal'. In the first instance, he began to increase his staff numbers. Established in 1946, the Department of Semitic Studies was for a long time the only department in an Australian university that offered a full four-year honours degree, focusing on languages. Before John's arrival the Department comprised one Professor (Maurice Goldman) and two lecturers; by 1963 it had expanded to one Professor and eight lecturers. Over a period of fourteen years, John gathered experts from across the globe – Australia, England, Finland, Iran, Pakistan and Syria – and built a remarkable unit that was well known for its comprehensive curriculum and research interests. This community of scholars formed a friendly and relaxed atmosphere that accommodated eccentricities. A hint of this is provided by John himself in the preface to one of his books: 'The present work *The Fourth Gospel and the Jews* was written by me and literally lost for some years in my study until it was found in the process of moving.'

Ever with an eye on drawing his department closer to the field's centre of gravity, John promptly founded, in the same year (1960), two annual periodicals, thus providing researchers in Australia with a forum for publication: *Abr-Nabrain* (now *Ancient Near Eastern Studies*) was published by E J Brill (Leiden), whereas *Milla wa-Milla: the Australian Bulletin of Comparative Religion* was a local production, but no less international in its outlook. Then came resources. A good library was essential and with characteristic energy and resolve he set about building up the Middle East holdings in the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne. Drawing on his experience at Leeds, John also began to build a manuscript collection of impressive proportions, travelling to various Middle Eastern heartlands in his quest. The collection is now considered among the treasures of the University's cultural collections and comprises mostly Islamic religious texts, many highly illuminated. There are, however, important poetic works, educational primers and texts on astrology and weaponry among its numbers. Most of the manuscripts are written in Arabic or Persian, although there are also examples penned in Turkish, Urdu, Ethiopic, Syriac, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Pushtu, Prakrit and Mongol. Where original manuscripts were not available, John ordered microfilm copies – literally hundreds – that now form an invaluable resource. His commitment to Melbourne is also reflected by acts of kindness that are little known in wider circles. A quick glance at the Library's catalogue will reveal a great many antiquarian books, some dating to the 1600s, that John donated.

All this contributed to a thriving postgraduate school. At a time when it was fashionable to send the best and brightest students overseas to undertake postgraduate research, Middle Eastern Studies, as the Department was called from 1966 onwards, he not only encouraged local students but attracted cohorts from other universities in Australia and overseas. Doctoral candidates pursued a diverse range of topics, including comparative religion, Arabic medicine, mysticism, Syriac Christianity, Samaritan studies, Islam and Near Eastern archaeology. The Department's contribution in Syriac studies was especially significant in the international arena.

John was deeply interested in the study of religions and published five books and many articles. The complexities of the Judaeo-Christian religion formed a thread through his entire career. Using form criticism, for instance, he argued that the Gospel of Mark is not an accurate chronological guide to the ministry of Jesus and as a whole owes much to selected Old Testament passages as determined by Midrash. The significant happenings in the Judaism towards the end of the first century AD, the subject of another book and Samaritan studies (two further books) also piqued his intellectual curiosity. But it was the subject of comparative religions that saw him move seamlessly and most passionately between time and space, as his edited book on the subject suggests, ranging widely from the theology of various Asian faiths through Christianity, Judaism and Islam, to Sufi mysticism and the meditational discipline of Zen.

Although the Department of Middle Eastern Studies as an administrative unit no longer exists at the University of Melbourne, that the study of the Middle East still matters at Melbourne and now forms part of several programmes, is in no small measure a legacy of the foundation that John had shaped.

John Bowman is survived by Margaret, his wife of 62 years and their seven children.

Antonio Sagona¹

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Andrew Bowman and Andrew Jamieson for providing me with relevant details on John Bowman's early life and the University of Melbourne manuscript collection respectively