



## STANLEY ISAAC BENN 1920-1986

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Half a year after his retirement, Stanley Isaac Benn, a leader in the field of social philosophy both here and abroad, and one of its most accomplished contributors, died in Canberra on July 25, 1986. He died, as he wished, at his country home in the midst of his family, displaying to the last his characteristic kindness, lucidity, and admirable equanimity in the face of formidable illness. He was both a prominent and highly regarded philosopher, being a member not only of this Academy but also of the Academy of Social Sciences, and Vice-President of the Australian Society of Legal Philosophy. He worked actively throughout Australian universities to cultivate discussion of, and maintain interest in, the

problems of social and legal philosophy.

Born and educated in West Ham, London, Stanley Benn graduated from the London School of Economics with a B.Sc. degree in economics and government, and with a special interest in seventeenth-century political philosophy. From 1941 to 1946 he served as a teacher of social topics to troops in the British Army, learning there the attractive directness and simplicity of manner which marked both the way that he dealt with philosophical problems and those of daily life. He left graduate work in 1948 to become a lecturer in Government at University College, Southampton - later the University of Southampton - and remained there for fourteen years. By the time he began lecturing he had formed his chief academic interest - that of the philosophical bases of social life - and had begun to pursue it systematically. The question to which he gave the greater part of his academic life from that period onward was this: what does membership in a human society imply for the people who live in it? All his writing was ultimately based on that query: his three dozen substantial articles, many of them much referred to and often reprinted, on such topics as political sovereignty, freedom, autonomy, human rights, punishment, and political participation; his thirteen articles on political philosophy in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967); and the content of the various books of which he was co-author and co-editor. The first of these books, written with R.S. Peters, was *Social Principles and the Democratic State* (1959).

It was this book that made his name known in Australia, and he joined the Philosophy Department of the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University in 1962, remaining there until his retirement as Professorial Fellow in 1985. During that period he co-edited and partly wrote *Rationality and the Social Sciences* (1976), *Political Participation* (1978), and *Public and Private in Social Life* (1983). All his work is marked by his passionate determination to achieve clarity about complex and obscure questions, by his success in doing so, and by his effort to bring apparently diverse issues into a rational order.

Stanley Benn was a tireless discussant, happy to talk about serious issues for hours on end, a scrupulous critic of both his own and other people's work, and a man who devoted the last weeks of his life to the company of his wife, Miriam, herself a university lecturer and his constant colleague, and to their two sons. Up until almost the very last he worked to complete his book, *A Theory of Freedom*, which will be published in the near future.

*R. Brown*