



JOHN JEFFERSON BRAY

1912-1991

John Bray was educated at seven hills Primary School, St Peter's College and the University of Adelaide. He graduated as Bachelor of Laws and was admitted to the degree of Doctor of Law by the age of twenty five. He quickly established himself as a barrister of outstanding abilities and was made Queen's Council in 1957. He was appointed Chief Justice of South Australia in 1967 and held the office with remarkable distinction until his retirement in 1983. Both nationally and internationally, his judgements have been cited for their precision, and admired for their elegance, liberality and compassion. He changed the interpretation of the law in his state, profoundly and beneficially. He was made a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1979. He served on the Libraries Board of the State Library for more than 40 years. He was a constant and generous supporter of the Friendly Street poetry group. He was Chancellor of the University of Adelaide from 1968 till 1983. He became an Honorary Fellow of the Academy in 1991.

These are the more notable achievements in a remarkable career in public life. He combined them with a prodigiously broad and deep learning in history, linguistics and literature. He published several volumes of poetry. His life of the Roman emperor Gallienus is also on the point of publication. These aspects of his life were at least equally important to him as his public achievements and they lie nearest to the Academy's concerns.

Such rare accomplishments belonged to a rare and rich personality. John had a powerful, profoundly learned, classical mind. He felt strongly that many of the values which he most admired had found their noblest forms in times remote from his own. But his intense egalitarianism and a sense of justice truly passionate led him to value much in modern life. His deep scepticism, quite free of cynicism's envious sneer, gave him a remarkable openness of mind. This, and his ironic view of human life, were indissolubly tied to his massive integrity, honesty and generosity of mind. He sympathised with the less respectable aspects of life; although he was a person of great natural dignity, he never once thought of it as something to stand on. He viewed his own rise to conventional respectability and recognition- 'politeness at the bank', in one of his poems- with amused ambivalence. He took pleasure in the camaraderie of the pub and the party, making it understood, in accepting the position of Chief Justice, that he would continue to enjoy these as frequently and vigorously as ever. Although he could be extremely shy, the warmth of his affection and the catholicity of his friendships were legendary.

John Bray left a body of distinguished poetry. In the 1940s and 1950s his friendship with the poet Charles Jury strongly influenced him. Jury exalted the culture of classical times, but Charles was closer to romanticism, more nearly a mystic, than John ever wanted to be or could have been. John, though he admired and freely translated the classical poets, wished for no archaic muse. Charles's circle included younger poets very different from himself (notably Brian Medlin) and theatre people (such as Colin Ballantyne and me). John drew deeply on a number of groups of these friends and gave much to them, as he did to the Friendly Street poets. In the 1950s, one group met regularly in the bar of the South Australian hotel on Saturday afternoons. Another, Jury's small reading circle, known to those of us who belong to it as The Poetry, goes back to the 1940s. After Charles died, John hosted The Poetry, to which

his commitment persisted to the very end. His Saturday drinking and conversation moved to the Sturt Arcade Hotel, where his circle grew in size and influence on Adelaide's literary life.

Bray did not begin writing poetry until about 1954. Medlin and Jury were then writing verse plays. John was prompted to write one, too, probably without seeing this as his becoming a poet. All three plays were produced and directed in 1955 by Colin Ballantyne and the Company of Players. (I had the intimidating privilege of playing the lead in both Bray's and Medlin's plays and a main part in Jury's.) John was surprised and delighted by the theatricality of his *Papinian*, the vividness of its characters on stage and the flexibility which the actors found in its superficially rigid blank verse. It is a very significant play, though still unpublished. It led him to think seriously of poetry as among his main occupations. He went on to write increasingly elegant, deft and trenchant poems until the end of his life, which came on 26 June 1995.

It may seem a paradox that someone whose perspective on human history ranged so widely, whose respect for classical culture in many ways outweighed that for his own, should have been strongly attached to Adelaide. Perhaps it suits life in a parochial city to feel that one's own time is remote from much that is bravest. In any event, John was Adelaidian to the core, his vast affection for the place sitting easily with a sardonic view of its provincial, staid and stuffy side. He did not love it better as it grew modern and affluent, and as amplified rock music in pubs intruded more and more on conversation. He was a main force among those who have made it a more cultivated, liberal place. Adelaide has lost a rare and lovable personality, a talented and witty poet and the most distinguished Chief Justice in its history. Not the least significant of his memorials is the variety and distinction of his friends, and the quality of their feelings for him.

Graham Nerlich

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