



Robert Francis Brissenden
1928-1991

Bob Brissenden, who died on 7 April, 1991, aged 63, had been retired from the Australian National University - and effectively from academic life - since 1985. During the time since then he had built on his reputation as a poet (*Winter Matins* 1971, *Elegies* 1974, *Building a Terrace* 1975, *The Whale in Darkness* 1980, *Gough and Johnny were Lovers* 1984), with the publication of *Sacred Sites* (1991), and established a reputation as a writer of sophisticated thrillers (*Poor Boy* 1987 and *Wildcat* 1991). But it was as a literary scholar and critic that he first made a name for himself.

Born in 1928, at Wentworthville, he graduated from Sydney with first class honours in English (BA 1951, MA 1954), before being appointed briefly as Senior Tutor in Melbourne (1951) and as Temporary Assistant Lecturer in English at Canberra University College in 1952, preparatory to going to Leeds (1954-1956, on a British Council grant), where he completed a PhD on the novel of sentiment in the eighteenth century. Appointed Lecturer in English at the Canberra University College in 1957 he was to remain on the staff of the Australian National University from the time of the amalgamation of the teaching faculties with the research schools in 1960 until his resignation because of ill-health. He held a senior research fellowship in the History of Ideas Unit (Research School of Social Sciences, ANU) for three years, before being promoted to Reader in 1969. He was elected a fellow of this Academy in May 1976.

Bob Brissenden's formal training was as an eighteenth century scholar (witness his *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade*, 1974, his several volumes of *Studies in the Eighteenth Century* (1970, 1973, 1976, and 1979, the last two with J.C. Eade), his edition of *Joseph Andrews* [1977]). His enthusiasm was as a literary critic in the new-found field of Australian literature (witness his numerous, frequently seminal, essays on Patrick White, Judith Wright, James McAuley, A.D. Hope, and others), his anthologies of short stories (*Southern Harvest*, 1964) and of poetry (1972). But his energy led him into American literature and his entrepreneurship into many areas, academic and non-academic - eighteenth century studies, Australian literary criticism, censorship, the south coast and the environment, repertory, wine and food, the staff association, poets' lunches, etc. He was at his best when gripped by a new intellectual excitement, as in a memorable lecture on Wallace Stevens.

Foremost amongst his entrepreneurial activities, academically, were the Nichol Smith seminars (commemorating the acquisition by the National Library of a large part of David Nichol Smith's

library) and, following five years as Associate Editor of *Meanjin*, a year (1964-65) as Literary Editor of *The Australian*, a venture which changed permanently for the better - principally by an improvement in the level of reviewer or commentator it attracted - the literary pages of the major Australian newspapers. This movement outside academe was to lead to his becoming first a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council and then its Chairman (1978-1981). He was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for services to literature in 1982.

He retired in 1985 and was increasingly disabled by Parkinson's disease. Yet he remained an essentially free spirit, an adopter and champion of causes, a fighter for what he believed in. He despaired of grey and faceless men, of whom he found an increasing number in the university and was characterised always - and probably suffered because of - an element of the larrikin in his own make-up. He valued the creativity of people - something which he rewarded in his stint on the Literature Board - and took a pride in his own creative writing, believing increasingly that those who could not *do*, who lacked the spark themselves, were in no position to criticise. He was a raconteur, a writer and singer of songs, a satirist of considerable sharpness and no mean ability, a lover of life and the good things in life - but at the same time a person of deep humanity and gentleness, a person who took an Australian pride in being able to talk to ordinary people but who could rise above this, in his sensitivity and the learning he wore so lightly, as occasion demanded. As a poet he best revealed this common touch - making ordinary moments memorable, finding poetry in everyday things and occurrences. As a novelist, he had yet to establish his range in finding the novel a vehicle for wit and allusion but at the same time a means of grappling with society and social mores on a more epic scale than was possible in essentially conversational poetry. And perhaps it is for what he gave so freely and in so many ways to the conversation of men - 'the last flower of civilisation' as Emerson described it - that he is best remembered. Witty, elegant, articulate, wise, warm-hearted, passionate, he was, as many who enjoyed his company know, truly a 'good companion'. Bob Brissenden is survived by his wife, Rosemary, and by three children, Michael, Venetia, and Ben.

W.S. Ramson