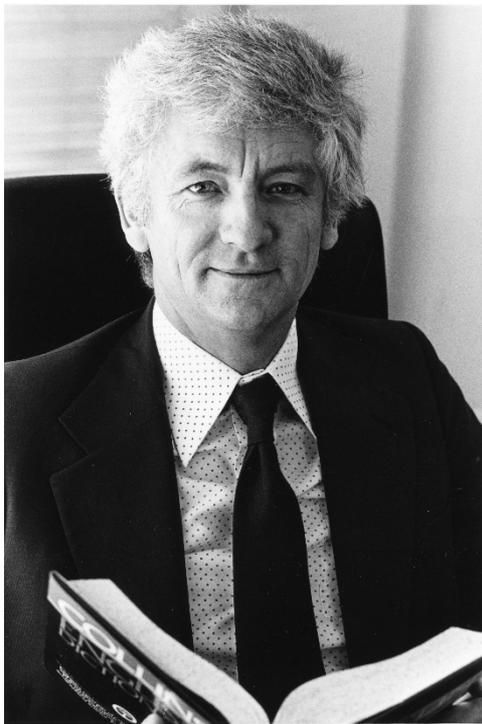


Gerald Wilkes FAHA

1927-2020



Australian Academy of the Humanities archives

Emeritus Professor Gerald Wilkes FAHA, Foundation Fellow and former President of the Academy, who was born on 27 September 1927, died peacefully on 15 May 2020. A pioneering figure in the study of Australian literature, he was also known internationally for his scholarly editions of English authors Ben Jonson and Fulke Greville, as well as for his work on Australian English. Indeed, when one adds in his contributions to teaching and administration, appropriately for a scholar of the English Renaissance, he could truly be termed a Renaissance man.

Wilkes attended Canterbury Boys' High School before enrolling in Arts at the University of Sydney, completing his BA with First Class Honours in English in 1948, followed by a Diploma of Education. In a 1966 interview he noted that he began reading Australian authors in his final year of high school, 'people like Henry Handel Richardson and Brennan'. Accordingly he took the then radical step of writing his Honours thesis on Richardson's novel *Maurice Guest* (1908), already displaying his scholarly interests by comparing the published copy to the earlier manuscript version held by the NLA. He went on to write his MA thesis on Christopher Brennan graduating in 1951 with First Class Honours and the University Medal. His interpretation of Brennan's *Poems* (1913) as one long poem in the style of the French symbolists has remained the standard reading. Both theses displayed the detailed scholarship that, though the norm in studies of English authors, had rarely been applied to Australian ones. Wilkes published many essays on Brennan from the early 1950s up till 2008, as well as the monograph *New Perspectives on Brennan's Poetry* (1953). Until his final illness, he was working on a scholarly edition of Brennan's letters.

At a time when doctoral qualifications were not standard for university appointments, Wilkes became a tenured member of Sydney's English department in 1952, having held

temporary teaching appointments there while completing his MA. He also began his long association with the literary quarterly *Southerly*, established in 1939 by the Sydney branch of the English Association, with Guy Howarth from the Sydney English department as editor. Wilkes began reviewing books for *Southerly* in 1949 and was assistant editor in 1951 when Howarth was overseas. As well as articles on Brennan, he also published early essays there on the contemporary novelists Eleanor Dark and Katharine Susannah Prichard. In 1953 he won a travelling scholarship to Oxford to undertake his DPhil. In the same year he married a fellow student, Marie Pauley.

At Merton College, Oxford, Wilkes wrote his doctoral thesis on "Poetry of moral reflection at the turn of the sixteenth century", supervised by F. P. Wilson, joint general editor of the *Oxford History of English Literature*. The degree of D.Phil. was awarded in 1955. A central figure in the thesis was the Elizabethan statesman and poet, Sir Fulke Greville, friend of Sir Philip Sidney, who was to remain a focus of Wilkes's research.

After returning to the Sydney English department in 1956 Wilkes was promoted to Senior Lecturer. In 1962 he became the university's Foundation Professor of Australian Literature and developed an Honours option in the subject. Over the next decade he published essays on many of the authors taught as part of this course, including Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, A. D. Hope, Judith Wright and Patrick White as well as some overviews of the area. This work culminated in *Australian Literature: A Conspectus* (1969) in which among many other things he offered a reappraisal of the standard nationalist interpretation of the 1890s as the beginnings of Australian literature. He pointed out that many major authors, such as Richardson and Brennan, produced work that was not particularly

Australian and that others, like Lawson and Furphy, should be valued for the literary rather than nationalist or historical qualities of their writing. During the 1970s he expanded this approach into a reassessment of nineteenth-century Australian literature, dismissed by earlier critics as of minor interest. He edited a collection of nineteenth-century poetry, *The Colonial Poets* (1974), and in *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn: Literary Evidence for Australia's Cultural Development* (1981), demonstrated the need for inclusive rather than exclusive definitions of Australia's cultural identity, a need that has become even more crucial over recent decades.

Just as Wilkes wasted no time in beginning to publish on Australian topics, he was soon publishing in early modern literature. His earliest article was in the venerable Oxford journal, *Notes and Queries*, on Sir Walter Raleigh's 'The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage', the first of several pieces in that journal. 'The Sequence of the Writings of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke' (*Studies in Philology*, 1959) was an important prelude to the edition of Greville's *The Remains: Being Poems of Monarchy and Religion*, in 1965, and the two-volume edition *The Complete Poems and Plays of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke* in 2008. Another monumental editing project, the acme of his scholarly work in early modern literature, came to fruition with the publication by the Clarendon Press in 1981–82 of *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson* in four volumes, with a spin-off *World's Classics Ben Jonson: Five Plays* (1981).

While Wilkes continued to research and publish on both Australian and English literature, a new development was his interest in the Australian idiom, most notably displayed in his most popular work, *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*, first published in 1978, with later editions in 1985, 1990 and 2008, the last under the more

catchy title *Stunned Mullets & Two-Pot Screamers*. This led to his becoming a consultant for the Australian editions of *Collins English Dictionary*, as well as to several essays and the 1981 Annual Academy Lecture on 'Insurgents and Survivors: The Language of a Colonial Culture'. Here, combining two of his research areas, he pointed out similarities between the Elizabethan English used by writers such as Ben Jonson and colloquial Australian usages. It was jokingly said in Sydney's English department that Gerry carried out not only the research expected from the Professor of English literature but also that of the Professor of Australian literature and the Professor of English language.

Somehow Wilkes also found the time to edit *Southerly* for twenty-five years from 1963 to 1987. As well as producing special issues on Australian writers such as Richardson and Brennan, he was always open to work on new developments in areas such as Australian drama, with special issues in both 1963 and 1975. The work of many new writers who were to become major figures also appeared initially in the pages of *Southerly*. These included Les Murray, Kate Grenville, Frank Moorhouse, John Forbes, Michael Wilding and Jennifer Maiden. In a speech given when he retired as editor, Wilkes noted that he had inherited a magazine of 70 pages and left one of 120.

Another feature of Wilkes' career was his association with Sydney University Press, set up in 1962. He served as a board member until its amalgamation with Oxford University Press Australia in 1987. Under its auspices, he inaugurated a number of series, including the Australian Literary Reprints series (from 1971), which among other titles included his edition of Brennan's *Poems* (1913). Another was the Challis Shakespeare, co-edited with his colleague A. P. Riemer (from 1980). The scholarship involved in determining which text

to use in a modernised version was often original and sometimes provocative, with editions in the series directed to the perceived needs of Australian students, particular attention being given to explanation of concepts and terms not likely to be familiar to them. Wilkes himself contributed editions of *The Tempest* (1980) and *Hamlet* (1984). The Challis texts were for many years those quoted in the NSW Higher School Certificate: Wilkes at various times served on the English Syllabus and Examination Committees.

There was also a series of monographs on texts usually included on university and secondary school curricula, *Sydney Studies in Literature*, and a journal, *Sydney Studies in English*. Colleagues were thus afforded venues for publication that were helpful both for those at the outset of their careers and for those more senior. Wilkes himself wrote on Jane Austen, George Eliot, Graham Greene and others as well as Shakespeare and Milton. The workload he carried was formidable: editing *Southerly* (a quarterly) and *Sydney Studies in English* (annual) concurrently, together with teaching and professional responsibilities, and his own research and writing.

Early in his professorial career these responsibilities had led to Wilkes becoming embroiled in a major split in Sydney's English department. What ensued was 'one of the most acrimonious and divisive episodes in the discipline's history in Australia' according to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. In 1963 Sam Goldberg, a graduate of Melbourne and Oxford and author of a recent critical study of James Joyce, *The Classical Temper* (1961), took up the Challis Chair of English Literature. While Wilkes adhered to a critical position broadly based in Oxford historicist traditions, Goldberg had strong sympathies with the ideas and practices of the Cambridge don F. R. Leavis who propounded evaluative

criticism, based on moral perspectives. Goldberg also had an abrasive personality.

Thanks to the Murray Report, Australian universities in the early 1960s enjoyed a period of expansion, so that almost at once Goldberg was able to make a number of appointments of people ideologically aligned with him. The bulk of the lecturing was assigned to the newcomers, and as rapidly as Faculty procedures allowed, there were radical curriculum reforms. In 1965, however, Wilkes took advantage of a clause in his contract that was interpreted as enabling him to offer courses in English as well as in Australian literature, with the result that the split in the department was formalised with alternative streams available in English literature, the Leavisite Goldberg “A” course and the more traditional Wilkes-led “B” stream. Before long, Goldberg and cohort returned to the University of Melbourne when he was appointed to the Robert Wallace Chair in 1966. Wilkes was offered and accepted the Challis Chair in 1966, retiring from it in 1996.

When the Australian Academy of the Humanities was established in 1969, Wilkes was one of the fifty-one members of the Australian Humanities Research Council who then became Foundation Fellows of the new Academy. He served the Academy as its inaugural Editor and member of Council from 1969 to 1983, before being elected as President from 1983 to 1986.

During his time as President, Wilkes oversaw significant developments in the Academy’s international engagements, including the publication of *The Language Atlas of the Pacific Part II*, launched in 1984, and the China Exchange Scheme, administered in conjunction with the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. This latter initiative led to the formation of a delegation to China, led by Wilkes, in which discussions were held with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Peking, and with provincial academies at Xi-

an, Shanghai and Guangzhou. A man of distinctly Anglo tastes, one of Wilkes’s concerns before this trip was the need to eat Chinese food. Fortunately this turned out not to be a problem. These activities and others like it provided the early foundation for the bilateral relationship between CASS and the Academy, one that continues today. Wilkes also oversaw several significant initiatives on the home front, including the Academy’s submission to government on the preservation of Aboriginal rock art, and the planning of the Bicentennial Conference “*Terra Australis to Australia*”, part of the official programme of the Australian Bicentennial Authority in 1988.

A tall man with a thick shock of hair, Wilkes could appear aloof to those who did not know him, yet his dry wit enlivened many situations. He was stubborn, holding fast to what he believed in. Always supportive of students and colleagues, he and his wife were also known for their hospitality.

Marie predeceased him in 2004. He is survived by his three children: Joanne, Professor of English, University of Auckland; David, retired public servant; and Geoffrey, Senior Lecturer in German, University of Queensland.

Margaret Harris FAHA

Elizabeth Webby AM FAHA