

# Obituary

## Sir Keith Hancock 1898–1988

I FIRST MET W. K. Hancock in 1950–1, shortly after he had left a chair at Oxford to become Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, part of the University of London, in Russell Square. Mary Boyd, of Wellington, had told me that his seminars were much better than some I was attending. They were, indeed, the best I ever participated in anywhere. He was able to attract very able post-graduate students and staff in a number of disciplines, including law, economic history, and anthropology. His seminars were genuinely inter-disciplinary. I met most of the historians of the Empire-Commonwealth there, people from all over the English-speaking world.

In 1954–5 I was a Visiting Fellow at the Institute and came to know Keith well. Although he had been knighted, and was to accept a second knighthood, he did not like being called 'Sir Keith'. I used, on occasions, to tease him by addressing him so; he retaliated by calling me 'Doctor' — he had the usual Oxford scorn of doctorates. I heard him tell an American that I knighted him, so he doctored me.

Like many successful people, he was extremely self-centred, and made use of people mercilessly. He once wanted me to abandon my own research for a time and do some for him. I declined, and he was displeased. When I visited his house, he had me scything. When I stopped after half an hour his wife, Thedan, said, 'You did better than John La Nauze — he worked for an hour'.

In 1957, after the death of Thedan, Hancock went, with his second wife, Marjorie, to Canberra, where he became Director of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. He remained there for the rest of his life.

Hancock was the best-known man in the world in his field. He had already written *Ricasoli*, a book about a nineteenth-century Italian leader, and his *Australia*, which has been the most influential interpretative short history of his country, as well as the several volumes of his *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*. He was not a great scholar, like J. C. Beaglehole, but his work had a superb range. The word he used for this was 'span'. His method was to 'put down shafts', not to try to master the complete range of evidence, which would have been impossible on such broad subjects. He raised the history of the Commonwealth to a quite new level.

What was striking about his *Survey* was that he could write at a superb intellectual level about economies, politics, constitutions, race relations, or international affairs. He also wrote very clearly.

At Oxford Hancock had been a Professor of Economic History, but he never used the economists' jargon. He believed in 'concealed theory', in not putting a theory 'up front', which is very good advice for most historians, who are likely to fall into the arms of the first impressive psychologist or sociologist they meet.

Hancock wrote numerous other books, including a very interesting autobiography, *Country and Calling*, about the tension between his calling as an historian, which kept him in England, and the call of his country. He also wrote *British War Economy* and a two-

volume biography of Smuts. He continued publishing books up into his eighty-seventh year. Hancock was, without question, the most outstanding Australian historian of our time.

KEITH SINCLAIR

*University of Auckland*

## **Publications from the Alexander Turnbull Library**

### **Women's Studies**

**Women's Words:** a guide to manuscripts and archives in the Alexander Turnbull Library relating to women in the nineteenth century, compiled by Diana Meads, Philip Rainer and Kay Sanderson. 137p. 1988. \$22.00

**Victoria's Furthest Daughters:** a bibliography of published sources for the study of women in New Zealand 1830–1914, compiled by Patricia A. Sargison. 107 p. 1984. \$11.00

### **French exploration**

**Early Eyewitness Accounts of Maori Life**

V.1. De Surville in 1769. 2nd ed. 1987. \$71.50

V.2. Marion du Fresne in 1772. 1985. \$44.00

V.3 & 4. D'Entrecasteaux in 1793; Duperrey in 1824.  
1986. \$44

Available from all good booksellers  
Distributed by the National Library Bookshop  
Molesworth Street  
Wellington