



### Graeme de Graaff

Graeme Ernest de Graaff was born in Melbourne in 1932. The youngest of three, he was very close to his younger sister Shirley. They grew up in Dandenong, on the outskirts of Melbourne and went to the local primary school. Graeme started school at the age of three. His mother, Isabella, said she could cope no longer with his endless questions. In any case she was an enthusiastic croquet player and she felt he should be at school instead of watching her play. It was while watching the game that the three year old developed his interest in croquet, which is now a great pleasure.

In 1937 the children of Victoria had their education interrupted for a year by the polio epidemic which swept through the country. All the schools were closed and Shirley contracted the disease. She spent many weeks strapped to a bed at the Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital. Shirley's severe illness had a profound influence on all the family.

Graeme went to the Dandenong High School for two years until the 2nd World War was over, and then to Caulfield Grammar. Each day he made the long train journey from Dandenong to Caulfield and then walked across the Caulfield racetrack to the school. In the afternoons the train returning from Melbourne carried a schoolgirl who was the daughter of friends of Graeme's parents. Lauris Elms occupied a seat by the window and would look out for Graeme when the train got to Caulfield. The two would talk of homework, politics and their ideals until Lauris got out at Springvale.

Because he had started school so early, Graeme matriculated at 16 and was considered to be too young to go to University. His parents allowed the young man to go off on a working holiday to Europe with three other school friends, one of whom, John Austin, subsequently married Shirley. In London Graeme worked in the Festival of Britain Office, which it was hoped would bring many tourists to Britain and much needed money into the British economy. (John Austin worked at Harrods in the Toy Department and one day his customer was the 4-year-old Prince Charles wanting a model train set!)

In his spare time Graeme worked in a Soup Kitchen under Hungerford Bridge, run by the West London Methodist Mission, feeding the 'poor relations of the down-and-outs' during the cold winters of 1950 and 1951. A big contrast from

the other evenings when he and John scrambled up the stone stairs to the sixpenny gallery of the Royal Opera House. The West London Mission was presided over by Donald Soper, a charismatic preacher who used to speak outdoors on Tower Hill and in Hyde Park.

After their time in England, John and Graeme hitch-hiked through Europe. Graeme's parents came to England and the four drove through Scandinavia. On returning to Melbourne, Graeme entered the Methodist Queen's College at Melbourne University, enrolling for an Honours History Arts Degree as a theology student. At the end of the first year he was invited to transfer to a Philosophy Degree. The head of that Department, Professor Boyce-Gibson, and the Master of Queen's, Dr Raynor Johnson, looked after him generously. He was awarded full scholarships to both College and University for the five years of his undergraduate and Masters degrees. Graeme says it was the grocers of Melbourne who gave him his education! The grocery chain, 'Moran and Cato' is no more, but for Graeme his major scholarships were first the Moran and subsequently the Cato!

Graeme tutored at Queen's College and at the University Women's College. He became Senior Tutor, and completed his Masters degree. His thesis, written in 1957, was entitled 'The Historical Alliance of Faith and Scepticism in Relation to the Contemporary Situation in Philosophy'. Subsequently he was awarded the Simpson residential scholarship to Oxford (given this time by an English grocer.)

Graeme sailed from Port Melbourne with a free first class ticket given by the Orient Line, and a borrowed dinner-suit - as men 'dressed' each night for dinner. He arrived after a six week journey, and was greeted on a grey and gloomy day at Tilbury by Trevor and Beryl Hubble (friends from Queen's College) and Lauris Elms (by then principal contralto at Covent Garden). After some days in London he went up to Oxford, to Balliol College and his rooms in Holywell Manor. Thus began a difficult time, as the money from his scholarship from Melbourne failed to arrive, and he discovered he was penniless. Fortunately his friend Trevor Hubble was able to lend him some money to tide him over until the scholarship funds appeared in his bank account. This was not a good beginning, but worse was to come! Graeme entered Oxford



### Graeme de Graaff

as a post-graduate student. He had arranged (he thought!) to work with the outstanding moral philosopher R.M.Hare. But he discovered that Mr Hare was thought to be in Harvard and was not expected back until the next Term. Graeme was rescued by the great Professor Gilbert Ryle, (whom he had met when Ryle visited Melbourne University) who cheerfully said that he would supervise his thesis. This shy man, in his beautiful Palladian rooms at Magdalen College, was incredibly kind. Hare did return to Balliol making up for his initial absence by inviting Graeme to stay with his family in Wales during the vacations. Graeme's thesis 'The Logic of "God Exists" ' was submitted in 1959 and the degree awarded.

You can see that his first few weeks in England were very distressing, and yet when he met up with Lauris Elms in London he gave no hint of the difficulties he'd had. In College he thought that as a mature-age student he should be free to come and go, but found that the Praefectus of the Manor declined to give him a key to be late in at night – as there were no keys! 'The men climb over the wall via the church roof, after hours,' he was told.

He bought a Lambretta motor scooter, and travelled each weekend from Oxford to London for the next two years to visit Lauris, who was a member of the Covent Garden Opera Company. Graeme has always said that the friendships he made while he was a resident in Queen's, and later in Balliol, have been a very important part of his life. Lauris and Graeme were married in 1958 at Kingsway Hall, by Donald Soper.

At the end of 1959, Graeme was offered a post in Oxford but decided that he would return to live and work in Australia. At that time many talented Australians travelled to Europe and did not return to Australia, but he persuaded Lauris that this country needed all its talent in order to build a strong young nation. They returned to Melbourne and Queen's College, where a small Town House/apartment had been built to accommodate the new Vice Master and his wife, Lauris. From 1960 Graeme lectured in the Philosophy Department at Melbourne University and with Dr Max Charlesworth established "Sophia", an important journal for the philosophy of religion. During the evenings he tutored in the College, talked to and counselled residents, and let students into their rooms when they lost their keys! Lauris looked after their baby daughter, Deborah, and began a new career as a concert singer.

After four years, a new Master of Queen's was to be appointed. Graeme applied unsuccessfully for the position. He now knew that what he wanted to do with his life was to direct a University residential College. In 1965 he was appointed to build and run International House at the University of Sydney. He was sent by the University to look at International Houses around the world. He travelled first to the Mother House, established with the assistance of Rockefeller funding in New York in 1923. He also went to Chicago and San Francisco, and then on to Paris and London. Lauris and Deborah met up with Graeme in Paris and then took a house in London for a month or so. While Lauris made a recording for Decca (in Kingsway Hall, where she and Graeme had been married) Graeme travelled in England and visited Colleges and Halls of Residence.

On returning to Sydney, the Graeme and Lauris began their 35 year residence in a little house in Chatswood. This was a happy time. International House was built on the triangular site of City Road and Cleveland Street. The site was previously occupied by terrace houses, with a pub on the corner where the Wool Room is now. It opened in 1966, with Graeme as first Director. Later he was successful in obtaining funds to add an East Wing and subsequently the Elkin Wing and the Maze apartment building.

During his first few years at International House Graeme lectured in the Philosophy Department at Sydney University. He continued on as a tutor for several more years.

Graeme's vision of fostering peace and understanding between people of many nations and cultures has led to the formation of some great and enduring friendships, many of them spanning oceans and national borders. Graeme retired as Director of International House in 1987 and took up a position in Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam). His idealism, integrity and courage have always been paramount. His interest in the world we inhabit and the people who live in it has never diminished. His sense of humour has made him the wonderful man that he is.

**Lauris Elms de Graaff,**  
2012