

Dr John Michael Bennett AM

The honorary degree of Doctor of Letters was conferred upon Dr John Michael Bennett AM by Pro-Chancellor John McCarthy QC at the Faculty of Arts graduation ceremony held at 11.30am on 1 June 2007.

Citation

Pro-Chancellor, I have the honour to present Dr John Bennett AM for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

One of the purposes served by the study of history is the understanding of the development of our separate national character and our constitutional and government institutions. The contribution of Dr Bennett to an understanding of the development of legal institutions, the courts of law and the personalities prominent in that evolution is unparalleled in Australia.

John Bennett matriculated to the University of Sydney in 1953, and graduated with the degrees of Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws. Whilst still a student he contributed to the Sydney Law Review, the University's principal legal journal. The Sydney Law Review was the beneficiary of at least eight further items of his original research. He became a contributor to many legal and historical journals, including the Australian Law Journal, as well as the Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society.

John Bennett's interest in original historical research led to a Master of Laws in this University and in 1990 the rarely conferred degree of Doctor of Laws. He was awarded a Master of Arts by Macquarie University for his thesis on Sir Frederick Darley, the 6th Chief Justice of New South Wales.

Dr. Bennett has served as Editor-in-Chief of the Australian Law Journal Reports and Editor-in-Chief of the 2nd and 3rd editions of the major encyclopaedic work 'The Australian Digest'.

In 1970 he became Director of Research of the Law Reform Commission and later Executive Member. He also held a number of University appointments. For many years he was a part-time lecturer in Australian Legal History in this University and at the University of Technology, Sydney. He was Senior Research Fellow in the Research School for Social Sciences of the Australian National University and from 1970 an occasional Visiting Fellow at that University. In 2002, he was appointed Adjunct-Professor in Law at Macquarie University.

Dr Bennett has held various senior offices in the Royal Australian Historical Society, including that of President. He served on Supreme Court historical committees, particularly the Charter of Justice Sesquicentenary Committee and the Heritage Committee. As recently as 2005, the Heritage Committee published Dr. Bennett's 'Colonial Law Lords', which examined the difficult early relationship between the legislature and judiciary in New South Wales, a relationship which to some extent has modern parallels.

Dr Bennett has also been a significant contributor to the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

His major works included a History of the New South Wales Bar, a History of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Portraits of Chief Justices of New South Wales, Keystone of the Federal Arch (a History of the High Court of Australia), and a History of the Solicitors of New South Wales.

Between 1969 and 2007 he published numerous books and articles, including contributions for the New South Wales Parliament and the Committee for the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government in New South Wales, most recently to the biographies of New South Wales Premiers.

In 2001 Bennett commenced his 'Lives of the Australian Chief Justices', a 20 volume series of which eleven have appeared to date, with the twelfth due at the end of 2007. All twenty biographies involve original research into the lives of the Chief Justices of the Colonies of Australia to the end of the 19th century.

These writings have involved Dr Bennett in painstaking research into original sources and rare secondary sources, many located overseas. They are not mere chronicles of lives but analytical portraits set in a background of newly researched social history.

The late Professor Alex Castles of the University of Adelaide, himself an eminent legal historian, described John Bennett's works as portraying an 'unparalleled knowledge of the judicial condition of the Australian colonies in the 19th Century.'

For his contribution to history and to law, Bennett was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2005. In 2000, he was awarded a Churchill Fellowship and, on two occasions, the C.H. Currey Memorial Fellowship in History by the State Library of New South Wales. In 2006 he was awarded the New South Wales History

Fellowship by the State Government.

John Bennett has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the history of New South Wales. Without his painstaking research, much of this early legal history could have been permanently lost. He has made an invaluable contribution to the understanding of the advent in the colonies of Australia of the rule of law and the institutions which sustained it. In the words of a former Minister for Education and Fellow of Senate, 'The University has produced a remarkable scholar and the history of our State is in his debt.'

Pro-Chancellor, I present John Michael Bennett, Australia's pre-eminent legal historian and a graduate of this University, for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.