

Mr William Peter Coleman

The degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) was conferred upon William Peter Coleman at the Faculty of Arts graduation ceremony held at 9.30am on 6 June 2008.



The Chancellor Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC conferring the honorary degree upon Mr Coleman, *photo, copyright Memento Photography.*

Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present William Peter Coleman for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa).

As essayist, editor, biographer and critic, Peter Coleman has been contributing to the intellectual life of Australia and to its world of letters for more than fifty years.

His writings constitute a remarkable analysis of civic society in Australia. More generally they address the philosophical and moral underpinnings of international civic life, especially in its nineteenth and twentieth century developments. Along the way he has documented some of the more significant public controversies of our time – not least those which have affected this university and its philosophy department.

For some twenty years he was editor or co-editor of *Quadrant*, arguably Australia's foremost monthly journal of ideas – particularly political and philosophical ideas and those concerning education and public life. One of *Quadrant's* early vocations was to counter the influence of the Communist Party in Australia. But he also edited *The Bulletin*, a once-iconic weekly which leant to the left as unreliably as *Quadrant* has leant to the right. He eschews 'dogmatic blinkers'.

In his autobiography, 'Memoirs of a Slow Learner' Peter Coleman contends that 'Scribblers, eggheads, bluestockings, chattering classes – the intellectuals have always had a bad name - not least in Australia'. Yet so much of his own incisive writing has helped to refute this contention.

Indeed, he is the biographer of an eclectic group of other notable Australian creative artists and public intellectuals – the film-maker Bruce Beresford, the political scientist and economist Heinz Arndt, the poet James McAuley and - Barry Humphreys.

In 1962 – which he now recognizes as the 'dawn of the age of Aquarius' - Peter Coleman published two very different books. One was on a history of government censorship in Australia. The other 1962 book, entitled 'Australian Civilization', which he edited, covered issues from the Arts and Business to Foreign Policy. It was with considerable prescience that he chose as contributors such luminaries of the future as Robert Hughes and Donald Horne. In it he reminds us that in 1887 *The Bulletin* slammed Sydney University for its 'absurd reverence for the extrinsic and the foreign, (and which) looks for specious inspiration in a museum of

antiquities'. Today our avowedly international university stands by the classical inspirations of its founders.

His 1989 magnum opus, 'The Liberal Conspiracy. The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe', is a deeply scholarly treatise on the organized intellectual resistance to the totalitarian Stalinist philosophy that held sway in much of Europe in the 1950s. His evident admiration for the intellectual resistance is balanced by an equally evident unease with the secretive methodologies of the CIA and unwelcome constraints on access to information.

He has co-authored a book on Cartoons of Australian History. It features a 1901 drawing of Edmund Barton, Australia's first Prime Minister who was also then a Sydney University Senate Fellow, dressed as a grumpy midwife and nursing an ugly baby named 'Commonwealth' – expected to become more beautiful with growth.

He chaired the Council which established the Australian Film, Television and Radio School.

He was also for a while a member of the NSW State Parliament and then, as MP for Wentworth, of the Federal Parliament. But, as he later explained, 'seeing the error of his ways he returned to his earlier vocation as writer and editor'.

This vocation to write shows no sign of abating, as the prolific reviews and essays which continue to appear in Quadrant attest. His writings exhibit a consistent respect for those who have 'accepted responsibility to work for the values essential to civilization'. Like Matthew Arnold, he sees education, and in particular a universal appreciation of our ancient cultural heritage, as being the true means to human equality and the antidote to anarchy. These are also the universalist vocations of this university, from where Peter Coleman first graduated in Arts in 1950.

Chancellor, I present William Peter Coleman for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa), and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.