

Emeritus Professor Adolphus Peter Elkin

Emeritus Professor A P Elkin was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters at a ceremony at the University on 2 May 1970.

Citation

Presented by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Bruce R Williams:

Deputy Chancellor, we honour today one of the great men in the history of the University. Professor Elkin is a renowned scholar. He is the very grand old man of Australian Anthropology. For a long time the development of his work was synonymous with the growth of Australian Anthropology.

For him, it is never enough to proclaim the importance of Anthropology as a scientific discipline which simply reconstructs or describes unchanged cultures; it is just as important to show the relevance of Anthropology to the changes in society that were occurring near at hand in New Guinea, Papua, and Aboriginal Australia. He has a deep concern for aboriginal welfare and education. He advised Governments, and they continued to seek his advice. He played a large part in creating a new public attitude to aborigines. He helped to reform the native administrations, and to establish the Aboriginal Welfare Board, of which he became an important member.

Elkin's career has been unusual, and yet looking back one can see a delayed predictability in it. He came late to the University as a student and he did not become a full-time member of staff until he was 45, although he had been appointed Professor of Anthropology four years earlier, in 1934.

After school he worked in a bank for four years. He did not find there adequate scope for his sense of enterprise and social service. So he decided to seek Holy Orders in the Anglican Church - provided that he could continue his education to University level. He had a wise and perceptive Bishop. Equipped with a University bursary and the Bishop Stunton Memorial Scholarship, he came to the University and St Paul's in 1912 and took a first class honours degree, majoring in Philosophy, three years later.

He started on the study of theological subjects but his Bishop, satisfied with his scholarship, ordained him and set him to parish work. In fact he never became a theologian. Perhaps his Bishop took the view that one of the great functions of the Anglican Church is to ensure that there is at least one scholar and gentleman in every parish of the land.

In 1918, he saw in the country beyond Bourke, aboriginal stone implements and burial sites, and started on a systematic study of the literature on the Aborigines. In 1922 he presented his Master's thesis on the religion of the Aborigines - his wife recalls that he completed his thesis on their honeymoon. From 1922-5 he was Rector of Wollombi. In this region, rich in Aboriginal engravings and paintings, his interests in Anthropology deepened. He resigned in 1925 to go at his own expense to the University of London, where he took his doctorate with a thesis on "Myth and Ritual of the Australian Aborigines". By the time he returned to Australia in 1927, Radcliffe Brown was here as the first Professor of Anthropology.

Indeed, Elkin came back to take up Radcliffe Brown's offer of a Fellowship to go to the Kimberleys for field work. This was a tough assignment, not without personal danger. The great success of his research there led to a further fellowship (1929-31) to study Aboriginal tribes in South Australia.

He did not at this time contemplate a career in Anthropology. Indeed, in 1929 his Bishop asked him to become Rector of St James's Church, Morpeth, adding that he would accept responsibility for his absence on Anthropological work, and Elkin accepted. He used his stipend to appoint curates. He was Rector of St James's for eight years, and resigned in 1937 because of the pressure of work and travelling entailed in oversight of the parish, and in the professorship of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. He maintained close ties with the Newcastle diocese, and in 1955 published his monumental history of the diocese.

From 1937 Elkin entered full-time into his natural vocation. He extended his own field work and publications. He developed a pattern for future Australian work in Anthropology. He planned to fill the great gaps in our knowledge of native peoples and their cultures in Australia and New Guinea. He organised funds. He trained field Anthropologists. He interested others and cooperated with them in the study of Aboriginal art and music.

He took over "Oceania" at a time when it appeared to have no future. He still manages and edits it, and only last week he was in to see me concerning plans to extend its role in the field of human biology.

His range of activities and achievements is astonishing. His publications up to 1963 take 16 pages to list in "Aboriginal Man in Australia", a volume published in his honour. He had a wide range of other activities - listed in that volume of essays in his honour though far too numerous to detail here - which added to the value of his work in the University.

His interest in the University and in its students has been maintained in his retirement. He was a splendid Fellow of the Senate, continued his interest in and contribution to St Paul's, plays a large part in the life of International House.

How has he achieved so much? His native ability enabled him to get to the heart of problems quickly. His relaxed self-control enabled him to use his great physical and mental energies to the full. His sense of social service and compassion for the troubled and the underprivileged gave him an abiding sense of vocation. His insatiable spirit of inquiry permeated his research and teaching and everyday life, and kept him youthful in mind.

The key to his attitude may be found in one of his favourite passages in Revelations: "Behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it".

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