

## Mr Leslie Allan Murray AO

The degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) was conferred upon Leslie Allan Murray AO in 2001.

### Citation

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Leslie Allan Murray, AO, graduate of the University of Sydney (1970), for the conferring of the degree Doctor of Letters (honoris causa).

What would the casual reader conclude about a man who, in Who's Who, lists as one of his recreations, "poking about vaguely in the bush"? It sits alongside "yarning" and "bookshopping", neither of which is at all surprising, because Les Murray is a teller of tales and tall stories in the tradition of bush life. He also commands an extraordinary range of learning, at the heart of which is his knowledge of languages reflected in his four years as a translator of Western European Languages at the Australian National University in the 1960s.

Les Murray first emerged as a poet in the 1960s and soon became a fulltime writer. His huge output, which points to his abundant creativity and productivity, includes twelve separate volumes of poems, four volumes of essays and prose, and three major anthologies.

He has received every national literary prize possible for an Australian poet. His international awards include the prestigious European prize for Poetry, the Petrarca Preis 1995, the T.S. Eliot Prize 1997, and the Queen's Medal for Poetry 1999. It is a formidable record that has brought with it wide recognition for Australian poetry. His many public readings of his own poetry have made it accessible to a world-wide audience.

Les Murray has been, as well, a tireless worker on behalf of his fellow Australian poets. His anthology *The Oxford Book of Australian Verse* is the most generously democratic selection of the poetry of his compatriots that has appeared. It was followed by *Fivefathers* in 1994, which presents the work of Kenneth Slessor, Roland Robinson, David Campbell, James McAuley and Francis Webb.

There are many Les Murrays. There is the author of the poems; the essayist who examines politics, religion, literature and history with deep insight and in precise and provocative words; the controversialist who was asked to write the preamble to the constitution; the republican advocate who launched a book by an anti-republican, and who once wanted to redesign the Australian flag. Over the years, he has assumed the status of a figure like Yeats in Ireland, Neruda in Chile or Whitman in the USA, a figure who has broken out of the frame of poet and writer to become a national bard.

He is a poet of many different voices, which express with equal force the reality of country people and life in outback towns, and of technology and high-rise buildings in modern cities. There are magical and haunting early poems like "An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow", "Noonday Axeman" and "The Broad Bean Sermon", comic narratives like *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, and the remarkable recent work *Fredy Neptune*. Two of his finest poems express what is, for many, the essence of his work. One is "Equanimity", in which Murray finely discriminates between equanimity and inertia; the other is "The Quality of Sprawl", about the virtue of unpretentious relaxation that Murray sees as an image of his country.

He celebrates the abundance and plenitude of contemporary Australia without losing sight of the uniqueness of individual participation in the complexities of human life.

Chancellor, I present to you Leslie Allan Murray, AO for the conferring of the Degree, Doctor of Letters (honoris causa).