

## Emeritus Professor Bernard William Smith



The degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) was conferred upon eminent art critic Emeritus Professor Bernard William Smith at the ceremony held at 11.30am on 8 July 1997.



Emeritus Professor Bernard Smith, *photo, 'The University of Sydney News', 31 July 1997.*

### Citation

*Presented by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor D J Anderson*

Chancellor

We honour today, Bernard William Smith, an historian and critic of art who gets to the root of things, an essayist, a poet, a past President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and the founding Director of our Power Institute of Fine Arts and first Power Professor of Fine Arts.

After school he spent two years at the Sydney Teachers College and by a lucky chance took Art as his special subject - his first choices of History and English being unavailable - and came under the influence of Mary Marsden. She gave him his first lessons in the principles of art, and memorable tutorials from reproductions of the Old Masters and originals of the early Sydney modernist painters.

After nine years as a primary school teacher, during which he practised his skills in drawing and painting and decided to become an art historian, he became Education Officer at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In his third year there he became a part-time Arts student at the University of Sydney. He had already written *Place, Taste and Tradition*, a landmark in Australian art history, and he swept through the first two years of his course with credits and distinctions.

He then was given two years leave from the University, and travelled to London to see Australian art in the context of the European heritage. While in London he made a catalogue of art-works from Cook's expeditions, gave a BBC lecture on Australian Art, studied at the Warburg Institute of the University of London, and wrote a piece on 'The European Visions and the South Pacific' which was published in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*.

Perhaps the admirable Mary Marsden, a migrant from Cambridgeshire, had influenced Bernard to study Australian art in its European heritage, and to state later that he wrote with Europe as his antipodes, seeing it from a distance and yet part of himself, his cognitive space and his culture. In that context, his Murtagh Macrossan Lecture for 1961 on *The Myth of Isolation* was one of his many radical re-appraisals which helped to change our thinking about Australian art.

After a gap of three years he returned to his part-time degree studies, achieved a High Distinction in Pre-Historic Archaeology and a Distinction in English and the Evening Students' Prize. The following year he graduated with Honours in English Literature.

After a PhD at ANU he became a lecturer, aged 39, in the Fine Arts Department of the University of Melbourne. During his eleven years at Melbourne he published in 1960 perhaps his finest work, *European Vision and the South Pacific*, and in 1962, *Australian Painting 1788-1960*, a comprehensive history set in its cultural and social context. Also in 1962 he was awarded the Ernest Scott Prize for Australian History. As a sign of the range of his interests and literary skills in 1964 he received the Henry Lawson Festival Award for Poetry.

Earlier he and Clifton Pugh decided to organise an exhibition of figurative painting which they judged was threatened by abstract art. In consultation with the painters Pugh, Arthur and David Boyd, Blackman, Brack and Dickerson, Smith wrote *The Antipodean Manifesto* which enraged the Sydney abstractionists, and helped to make a great success of the exhibition. One Sydney abstractionist, Elwyn Lynn, condemned the Manifesto as a form of censorship. Lynn was later Curator of the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art while Bernard was Director of the Power Institute, and but for that Manifesto relations between the Gallery and the Institute might have been closer.

In 1967 Bernard Smith returned to Sydney to establish the Power Institute and the Power Department of Fine Arts and Research Library. An Institute professing to study contemporary art, he insisted, could not afford to ignore its relations with contemporary society, and certainly he did not. For a changing society, he said, there is 'a changing, revolutionary art'. He built a flourishing department, with a strong honours school, and for ten years he enriched the life of the University. While here he published (with his wife, Kate) *The Architectural Character of Glebe, Documents on Art and Taste in Australia*, and *The Antipodean Manifesto: Essays on Art and History*. As the title indicates, those essays include his famous Manifesto and a great range of essays which convey the wealth of his interest and scholarly qualities. There is one fascinating essay, for example, on Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' and Cook's second voyage.

In 1977 he returned to Melbourne as Senior Associate in the Department of Fine Arts, and he continued to teach within and outside the University, and to write more books: *The Boy Adeodatus*, an account of and reflections on his life until he left school teaching, *The Art of Captain Cook's Voyages*, *The Death of the Artist as Hero*, *The Critic as Advocate*, a biography of the artist Noel Counihan, and *Poems, 1938-93*.

Last to be mentioned, but not least in importance, were the 1980 Boyer Lectures, *The Spectre of Truganini*, where he was concerned to raise the conscience of 'White Australia', and to admit to a sense of his own guilt that through his concentration on European Art he had ignored Australian aboriginal art and aboriginal society. In 1989 he sold some of his notable collection of paintings to establish, in memory of his first wife Kate, an annual prize of \$10,000 for aboriginal arts.

Chancellor, I present this eminent scholar and generous man of action, Bernard William Smith, Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.