



Emeritus Professor Ken Goodwin AM

29 September 1934 – 12 July 2014

Ken Goodwin (1934–2014) was raised in Homebush, Sydney, son of a lift driver and a dressmaker. He was the first member of his family to attend university. He came to The University of Queensland in 1959 with a BA Hons. and a Dip. Ed. from the University of Sydney, and teaching experience at both high school and Wagga Wagga Teachers' College. His initial appointment was in the Department of External Studies, but after three years he 'went internal' and joined the English Department as a lecturer.¹ Through the 1960s he advanced rapidly, completing his MA from Sydney and his DPhil. from Oxford, and being rapidly promoted to Senior Lecturer (1967), Reader (1970), and Professor (1971).² As a colleague at the time commented: 'One minute he was Mr Goodwin, the next he was Dr Goodwin and the next he was Professor Goodwin'.³

Goodwin wrote his Masters thesis on the influence of the poet, Ezra Pound,⁴ and his earliest interest was in modern British poetry. However, attending a conference on the nascent sub-discipline of Commonwealth Literature at Leeds in 1964 led him to convene at UQ in 1968 the first triennial conference of the newly formed Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.⁵ The detail of Ken's planning for this conference became legendary, down to piles of sixpences (the then price of a local phone call) being placed next to the public phones in the residence in which international delegates were staying. The Association formed national and

regional branches, with Ken becoming the foundation chair of the South Pacific branch. He was voted Chairman of the international association a few years later. His role in the Association put him in personal, literary and professional contact with academics and writers from many Commonwealth countries among whom he was popular and respected, leading to appointments as external examiner to universities in Fiji, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, and as advisor on chair appointments at the University of Hong Kong.

In the early 1970s as well as changing from year-long courses to semesters, the University embarked upon a process of administrative democratisation. Until 1973 the ranking professor in each Department was appointed also as Head for life.⁶ Rotating Headships were introduced, with the Departments asked to vote for their Head.⁷ Under this new system, Ken Goodwin became the first elected Head of the English Department. Curiously, he was also made Acting Head of the Department of Religious Studies for part of this time. He guided the English Department through an exuberant but unruly period with great tact and diplomacy.

As an administrator, Ken had certain sterling qualities. He had an excellent sense of departmental politics, chose his battles carefully, and did not waste energy or time needlessly. His rhetorical style was elaborate but rational rather than passionate, and deeply effective. In a meeting where controversial topics

were being discussed he would typically wait until the more strident positions had been put and then, when the energy in the room was starting to sag, would nudge the meeting through complicated analogies, multi-part arguments, and references to abstruse rules and precedents in the direction he felt it should go. His ability to project total command of the immediate argument and simultaneously of the contextual issues, rules, precedents and probable outcomes without seeming to be confrontational was unparalleled.

Throughout his career he was recognised as a go-to person for all sorts of administrative difficulties and complexities. In still-hierarchical 1971, as a newly promoted Reader he was made Acting Head of Department ahead of two senior colleagues, one of whom had even had experience in the role. When the idea for an Australian Studies Centre was floated within the Department it was Ken who negotiated its passage through the various committees in the approval process. When he spent a study leave working in Fryer on his history of Australian literature, he had to protect himself from interruptions by counsel-seekers by concealing where he was working. In 1992 he was recruited by the University of Southern Queensland as Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic to beef up their research profile.

Although his formal degrees were earned for theses on English topics, he was reviewing Australian literature from very early in his teaching career, and his work in Commonwealth literature enriched his

approach to that study. The 1980s saw his most important work on Australian literature with the publication of his one-volume *History of Australian literature* (1986), his literary biography of Bruce Dawe, *Adjacent worlds* (1988), his edited collection of Dawe's prose work, *Bruce Dawe, essays and opinions* (1990), and his compendious anthology edited with Alan Lawson, *The Macmillan anthology of Australian literature* (1990). It is impossible to summarise his criticism in a sentence but one might start by remarking that it is explicatory and contextual – he believed that the critic's task was to tease out what the author had said, and that part of that teasing involved considering the circumstances that helped frame both the text and its reception.

Ken continued to publish on Victorian literature, particularly on the topic of his doctoral thesis, William Morris. He was interested in Morris as artist and designer as well as writer, and as late as 1989 published an article on Victorian stained glass of which Morris & Co. was a significant producer.⁹ His interest in art was not just academic and historical, however. He was a Trustee of the Queensland Art Gallery for more than a decade including four years as Deputy Chairman. On moving to Toowoomba he became a Council member of the Lionel Lindsay Gallery. He chose a striking painting by William John Hughes for the cover of *The Macmillan anthology of Australian literature* and was delighted some time later to be able to purchase the painting.⁹

Although Ken habitually projected an air of reserve, competence and erudition, he had a way of setting against that a robust, self-deprecating, and sometimes zany sense of fun. When he was overseas on leave in 1980 a colleague wrote to him mentioning *en passant* the visit to the Department by a prominent Australian poet. Ken subsequently replied: 'Have I ever told you that [the poet] is one of only two people who have ever thrown a typewriter at me. It was in my room, too, when I worked in External Studies. Powerful arm, rotten aim, fortunately'.¹⁰ Something of that side of him must have communicated itself to his students. In the early 1980s Ken arrived at his office one morning to find the door blocked by a large mattress decorated like an airmail envelope addressed to him. Ken played up to the prank declaring that he was going to report the students to the Post Office for failing to provide a return mailing address, and that he wasn't going 'to take the matter lying down'.¹¹

Ken was rewarded with many recognitions and honours across his career although the sharp-eyed might notice that many of the honour-givers wanted their pound of consultancy flesh. He was a member of the editorial boards of numerous journals, of committees of learned societies, of judging panels for literary awards, of boards of trustees for art galleries, of committees for music societies, of library foundations, and of academic research centres. However some honours were more graciously altruistic. The Alliance Française in Toowoomba made him their patron, the University of Southern Queensland awarded him a D. Litt., and in 1997 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia.

He deserved a long and productive retirement working on his music (he played piano, harpsichord and recorder), extending his scholarship and reviewing, and continuing to sit on the occasional board and committee, but it wasn't to be. A stroke in 1999 greatly reduced his abilities and although he was still to be seen at the occasional Friends of Fryer event, and even managed a few further publications,¹² he never really recovered. Some of his papers relating to Commonwealth Literature associations, and to the Australian Vice Chancellors' Committee on English Standards have been donated to the Fryer,¹³ as were transcripts he made of Australian poets' talks and interviews at the Warana Writers Weekend over almost a decade.¹⁴

CHRIS TIFFIN lectured in the Department of English (later the School of EMSAH) for over 30 years. He is a long-time Friend of Fryer.

REFERENCES

1. Other staff to transfer from External Studies to the Department of English about this time included Peter Edwards and Alrene Sykes.
2. Information on Ken Goodwin's appointments and promotions is drawn from the University Archives, and *University Calendars*.
3. Personal information.
4. Published as *The influence of Ezra Pound*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966.
5. The Proceedings were edited by Goodwin, and published as *National identity*, Heinemann Educational, Melbourne, 1970.
6. For the first time in 1973 the staff lists in the *University Calendar* used an asterisk to indicate who was Head of Department. Previously it had invariably been the senior Professor.

7. Technically the vote was non-binding guidance to the Vice-Chancellor, but in fact no vote by English Department staff was ever over-ruled.
8. 'Stained Glass', *Victorian Britain: an encyclopedia*, ed. Sally Mitchell, Garland, New York, 1989, pp.752-3.
9. Personal information.
10. Letter dated 17 October 1980, private collection.
11. *University News*, 28 July 1982, p. 6.
12. His last publication seems to have been 'Realistically, it's better to be naïve: communication theory may be at the end of its tether', *The Australian* (Higher Education) 23 February 2005, pp. 36-7.
13. UQFL540.
14. F2241.