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Remembrance: John (J.S.) Ryan (1929-2022)

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John (J.S.) Ryan (1929-2022)



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John Sprott Ryan

Situated in the eastern corner of the University of New England's (UNE) Armidale Campus, the J.S. Ryan Reading Room occupies a corner of the lower ground floor corridor of the Arts Building. It is a memorial to a man who became almost synonymous with English at UNE.

John Ryan came to Armidale when the university was in its establishment period, and he became part of a dynamic team of literary scholars who built a flourishing program in English. John was born in Dunedin, New Zealand. Travelling to the U.K., he studied at Oxford, where he encountered J.R.R. Tolkien, became entranced with his works, and a career was born. For over fifty years, John worked at UNE—best known as Australia's main university educating students by distance—teaching English litera-

ture with a focus on Middle English, the history of English, folklore, and more. I first met him when I joined the English team in 2002: he was long past the normal age for retirement, but I was immediately struck by his passion for his subject and his voluminous knowledge about Armidale and its surroundings. All who knew John could not fail to know that he was an enthusiastic fan of Tolkien's works; that he loved words, language, and folklore; that he had built a second house in his back garden, where his collection of dictionaries and newspapers was situated in rolling stacks; that he had married Susan; and that they had two young sons (Tom and Matt) who were promising intellects and excellent swimmers. They also had a beagle named Boromir. John had founded his own journal—*Australian Folklore*—volumes of which would turn up in one's office pigeonhole, and for which he was continually asking for contributions from colleagues and students. His office was legendary: one entered sideways and perched on a small chair by the door, from which to survey a large room stuffed with books. A long, double-sided bookcase divided the room diagonally, and every wall had floor-to-

ceiling collections. So extensive were his collections that it is taking us a long time to catalogue and assess.

Every day, John would walk up the hill from his house below the university, passing the deer park that is part of our campus (it came attached to the grand building, Booloominbah, and was kept up until recently). We are working on a plaque to name the path he took the 'John S. Ryan Walkway'. John taught me that the deer in the park like eating acorns, gatherable around campus; I remember standing with him, holding an ice cream container full of acorns, and feeding them through the mesh fence to the deer on the other side. John was a fount of information about the New England region—an idiosyncratic part of Australia so named because its high elevation means it has four distinct seasons, not unlike those of Old England. He contributed a great deal to understanding its heritage and the stories of settlers and colonists, of locals and of visitors. Publications poured off him, on topics as various as *Tolkien: Cult or Culture*; *Golden Words & A Golden Landscape: Essays On Uralla Gold Mining History & A Glossary Of The Miners' Language In Australia From The 1850s to 1905*; *Tales from New England*; and *Tolkien's View: Windows into his World*. He served on the editorial boards of *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore and Folklife* and of *VII*. He edited twenty-five volumes of *Australian Folklore*. He became one of the most productive members of the Heritage Futures Centre, run by our colleagues in history at UNE. When our university started a digital publication repository, John's output almost overwhelmed the data entry process.

John's like is not often seen: magisterial, occasionally demanding, utterly devoted to his subject, eager to share his knowledge. I taught some classes with him and noticed that he was able to find the good in some of the seemingly most disengaged students. He commented on student essays as if they were fine wines: one student rang me up to ask what John had meant when he wrote that his essay was 'suave and pithy'. He was not understood by all, but to those who did understand, he stood for something: the passionate pursuit of knowledge, the love of universities as a place where minds come together, the joy of reading, and the joy of sharing.

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