

# DRY LIGHT IS BEST

Dr John Orde Poynton, most generous benefactor to the University of Melbourne over a period of more than 40 years, passed away on Tuesday 13 February 2001 at the age of nearly 95.

Dr John Orde Poynton, AO, CMG 1906–2001

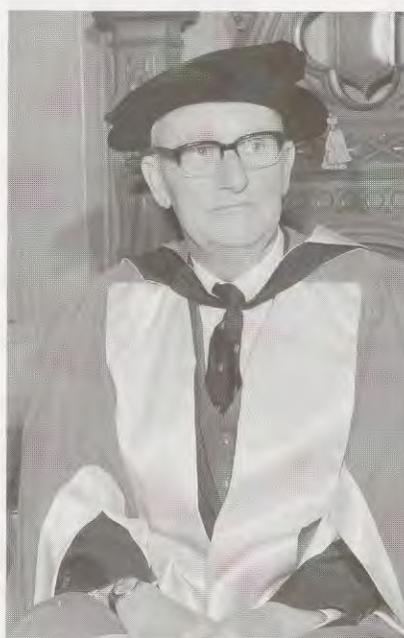
AO, CMG, MA (Cantab.), MD (Cantab. and Adel.), LLD Hon (Melb.) MRCS (UK), LRCP (Lon.)

On 31 July 1977, the honorary degree of LLD was conferred by the University of Melbourne on Dr John Orde Poynton. On that occasion, Dr Poynton was invited to give the convocation address. In this, entitled “Dry Light is Best”, he said,

It has been said of the Marquis of Wellesley (d.1842 — elder brother of the Duke of Wellington and a distinguished proconsul), “He never used a meaningless word or untidy phrase. His powerful mind, trained to perfection in the classical tradition, pursued an argument relentlessly to its utmost limits”.

This could be equally well said about Dr Poynton.

John Orde Poynton was born in London on 9 April 1906 and was educated at Marlborough College, Gonville and Caius College (Cambridge) and Charing Cross Hospital, London. After an appointment as senior resident medical officer at Charing Cross Hospital, he served as health officer, research officer and pathologist in various appointments in Malaya. Being in the British Army at the fall of Singapore during World War Two, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese and was in Changi and other prisoner of war camps for three and a half years. In 1947 he became lecturer at the University Medical School in Adelaide. He was appointed acting director of the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science of South Australia



Dr John Orde Poynton, on the occasion of being awarded an honorary LLD. (Photo: Norman Wodetski, University Archives.)

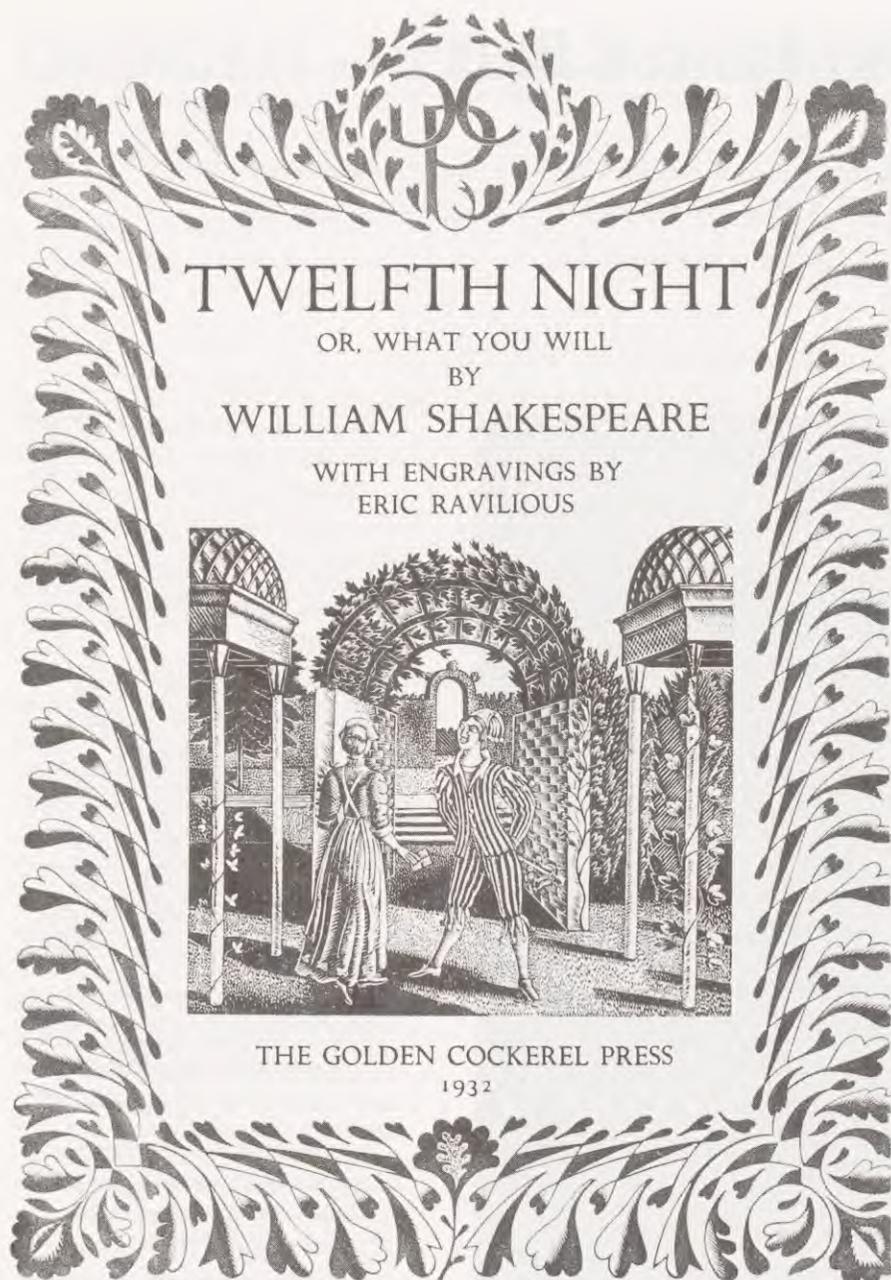
and in 1950 director of the institute. Whilst living in Adelaide, Dr Poynton was much involved in the local book world and was chairman of the Friends of the Public Library of South Australia from 1955 to 1960. His outstanding book collection, most of which has been donated to the University of Melbourne over the years, was mainly built up after the World War Two; the book collections of Dr Poynton and his father

— which existed in London before the war — were largely destroyed in the London Blitz.

Beginning in 1959, Dr Poynton donated well over 15,000 volumes to the University of Melbourne. This relationship with the University started with a visit to the nearly completed Baillieu Library in 1958. On 23 December 1958, Dr Poynton wrote in his distinctive, legible hand to the Vice-Chancellor, Sir George Paton,

It was most pleasing to see such a fine library building under construction and I am only happy that in due course my books will be in such an excellent home. An ancestor of mine (Thomas Hollis) sent a few boxes of books and a little money (£500 I think) to Harvard College to start a small library and now it has six million books — so I hope this will be a favourable omen.

This letter marked the beginning of a connection with the University of Melbourne which was to last until Dr Poynton's death. The first consignment of books from his collection arrived in the Baillieu Library on 6 November 1959. It consisted of about 850 volumes, among them a copy of the “Nuremberg Chronicle” (1493) and a Shakespeare 2nd Folio (1632). In each book was a slip with a description in Dr Poynton's hand writing. There were also 36 paintings, among them one by George Moreland, and a large number of prints. The prints in this donation included etchings by Rembrandt and



Private press publication — title page of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night or, What You Will*, published by The Golden Cockerel Press in 1932, with illustrations by Eric Ravilious. (Rare Books, Baillieu Library.)

wood cuts and copperplate engravings by Dürer.

The initial donation was recorded in the *University Gazette*, December 1959, with a lengthier description appearing in the December 1960 issue. The second consignment arrived in September 1960, and books were from that time donated on an almost annual basis. The last

small consignment of books to complete this donation is still to come to the University.

In 1961, Dr Poynton was appointed Consulting Bibliographer to the University. He was to be based in the Baillieu Library, and in early 1963 he moved to Melbourne to take up this

honorary position, in which he stayed until 1974. He was provided with a room in the Library with space for 2,000 books, a desk, a table and teaching space for 12 students. The Leigh Scott Room originally contained the library's rare book collection, which before the arrival of Dr Poynton was small in size but contained some treasures, notably from the George McArthur Bequest. With the additions of Dr Poynton's collection and his efforts to identify rare books in the general collections, space soon became a problem, as often happens in libraries. Provisions were, therefore, made for a rare book room, designed along the lines suggested by Dr Poynton, to be provided for in north-west corner of the 1970s extension to the Baillieu Library, as well as space for all the closed research collections on the first floor.

Although the size of the Poynton Collection makes it difficult to assess it at a glance, its various parts are closely interconnected. The books he donated were generally not medical books, but mostly *belles lettres* in the widest sense. The focus of the collection as a whole is on the history of fine printing and the art of the book, interests close to the heart of Dr Poynton. Amongst Dr Poynton's gifts are about 3,500 volumes of Greek and Latin classics covering the history of printing from the 15th century to the 19th century, several thousand first and early editions of major English authors of the 18th century and 19th century and a large collection of modern private press books and limited and first editions of 20th century writers. As well as an impressive run of the Kelmscott Press books of William Morris, the private press collection includes substantial holdings of Ashendene, Golden Cockerel, Vale, Essex House and Eragny Press publications. The Scott Collection of approximately 2,500 volumes, all by and about Sir Walter Scott, ranks amongst the best Scott collections in the world. Sir Walter Scott was Dr Poynton's greatest interest, and he has published several academic papers

on the Scott bibliography. In addition, there are significant collections of, amongst others, Lord Byron, Laurence Sterne and Samuel Johnson. A particular strength in the Poynton Collection is extra-illustrated books, covering most of the areas of the collection.

The books donated by Dr Poynton were always in the finest possible condition — if a book in poor condition is present, there is always a particular reason, such as excessive rarity. Dr Poynton was a very astute book collector. With his deep love of classical literature he chose Latin and Greek classics as one of his main collecting areas because this field was out of fashion. He was, therefore, able to collect a range of the finest work of printers, illustrators, and book binders at reasonable prices.

Dr Poynton generally left a slip in each book he donated to the Library. These descriptions were always hand written, often on pages from old doctors' prescription pads, which were particularly useful, as they provided three identical copies.

Dr Poynton's role as Consulting Bibliographer in the Baillieu Library went far wider than his own book donations, substantial as they were. Though the Library previously had a small rare book collection with some important and valuable books, it is largely thanks to Dr Poynton that the University of Melbourne now has an internationally significant collection of rare books. In addition to donating from his own collection, Dr Poynton also recommended significant works, many of which were purchased by the Friends of the Baillieu Library. Guidelines were drawn up to establish what types of material should be placed on closed access, and he personally evaluated and extracted books from the general stacks. In particular, he was responsible for forming the closed Australiana collections, and for identifying and segregating much rare material from the non-Australian collection.

Dr Poynton was particularly diligent in developing the Baillieu Library's collections of the period 1780 to 1850, as it was central to the development of Australia. This time span is also central to the donated part of the Poynton Collection, though it is not limited to this date range.

In a nine-page typed report to Sir George Paton, dated 20 April 1965, just before Dr Poynton departed on one of his many trips to England to enlarge and develop the University's book collections, he outlined his work to set up a rare book collection in the Baillieu Library and provided the following assessment:

Having regard to the age of the University and its importance as a centre of learning in a large and prosperous capital city the holding of valuable books is relatively poor and includes no special collections of a kind that are of any significance by international standards.

A high proportion of the old and rare books scattered through the collection are in a damaged or dilapidated condition.

The loss of early and rare Australiana due to their exposure on open access is of the order of 50% in terms of value, due in part to the theft or stripping of engraved plates from about 150 volumes, and in part from the overuse of valuable items as working copies by undergraduates.

Dr Poynton worked tirelessly to remedy this situation.

He retired to Mount Eliza and remained a philanthropist to the end, more recently to the benefit of the National Gallery of Australia. He had also been a major benefactor to the International Illustrated Book Collection and made major contributions to the Cambridge Australia Trust, which, with funds raised through donations and endowments, supports Australian students to carry out research at Cambridge University each year.

Those who knew Dr Poynton and grew fond of him are greatly saddened at the passing of a great man and of an era. He had warm relations with well-

known members of the British antiquarian book trade, and many of the older booksellers still remember him as a discriminating book collector and valued friend. Dr Poynton was a man of firm opinions and not easily pleased. He did not suffer fools gladly, but he had a knife-sharp intellect, a prodigious memory, the drier of dry wit, and considerable charm.

His all-consuming interest was books and bibliography, and as a book collector he has become a legend. He had extensive knowledge of the financial world and was an experienced investor. His gifts to Australia will live on in the book and print collections of the University of Melbourne, as well as in his significant donations to the Cambridge Australia Trust and the National Gallery of Australia. In 2000 Dr Poynton was awarded an AO in the Queen's Birthday honours in the general division for service to the arts, particularly as a benefactor to the National Gallery of Australia and to Victorian cultural institutions. ♦

Merete Smith  
Curator, Rare Books  
The University of Melbourne

*Ms Smith acknowledges the help of Miss Mary Lugton, for many years assistant to Dr Poynton in the Baillieu Library, and his successor as University Bibliographer, in compiling this memoir. She is also grateful for the assistance of Associate Professor Neville Norman with regard to the Cambridge Australia Trust, and Mr. Jeff Sitters of National Mutual Trustees.*

## THE FINAL SENTENCE

In the last issue of *The University of Melbourne Library Journal* we inadvertently deleted the final words of the last sentence of the article "Ned Kelly and the University of Melbourne" (page 5). Our apologies to the author, Michael Piggott. Here is the complete sentence —

It seems safe to observe that Ned Kelly and the University will continue to be linked. ♦