

# Introduction

## Remembering Ian Gordon

Janet Holmes and Graeme Kennedy

Ian Alistair Gordon was born in Edinburgh on 30 July 1908. He came from a modest family background with a bilingual, Gaelic-speaking mother who had worked as a maidservant in Inverness, and a father who served as an Edinburgh policeman. At the University of Edinburgh, he first completed two Masters degrees with honours, one in Classics and another in English, and then wrote a PhD on the court poet, John Skelton, and worked on the Scottish National Dictionary. In 1936, at the age of 28, he accepted an appointment to the chair of English Language and Literature at Victoria University College in New Zealand. By the time he was 39 he was heading the whole New Zealand university system, as Vice-Chancellor of the University of New Zealand, a position he held from 1947 to 1952.

Professor Gordon, affectionately known as “Prof” to generations of appreciative staff and students, was Professor of English Language and Literature at Victoria University for 37 years, until his retirement in 1974. He was a prolific scholar: he wrote over 20 books on topics from the late Middle Ages to his own time. These included biographies of the 15<sup>th</sup> century poet, John Skelton, and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish writer, John Galt; he subsequently produced editions of several of Galt’s novels. He also published an important early study of Katherine Mansfield, and editions of some of her writings. Janet first encountered his work as an undergraduate when his very accessible and entrancing book *The Movement of English Prose* was a set text in one of her courses at the University of Leeds.

Ian Gordon was also an excellent teacher. He is remembered particularly for his encouragement of studies of medieval English language and literature, and literary scholarship. He was one of the founding fathers of English lexicography in New Zealand, attracting many able students, and encouraging them to undertake study abroad. These included Don McKenzie, Douglas Gray, and Joe Trapp. Ian Gordon was himself a remarkable lexicographer, publishing several New Zealand editions of Collins

dictionaries. His lexicography students included Bob Burchfield, who became editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Bill Ramson, who edited the *Australian National Dictionary*, Grahame Johnston, editor of the *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary*, and Harry Orsman, who compiled the superb *Dictionary of New Zealand English*, and who laid the foundation of the New Zealand Dictionary Centre at Victoria University of Wellington.

As Professor of English Language and Literature, Ian Gordon was a key figure in the establishment of Victoria's English Language Institute in 1961, appointing its first director, George Pittman, and with Frank Brosnahan, establishing linguistics as a discipline at Victoria shortly afterwards.

In addition to his scholarly work in linguistics, Ian Gordon was a very influential figure in New Zealand higher education. John Gould's history of the University Grants Committee refers to Ian Gordon as "one of the most experienced academics in the country" in the 1960s. At various times between 1944 and 1961 he was Dean of Arts, or Chairman of the Academic Board, and at the forefront of those working for university reform, internal examining, and autonomy from British universities, ultimately preparing for the autonomy of the various colleges which made up the University of New Zealand. He was Chairman of the State Literary Fund for 22 years from 1951-1973, a member of the powerful University Grants Committee from 1960 to 1970, and a founding member of the Friends of the Turnbull Library.

Ian Gordon was not only a very prolific scholar and teacher he was also a very effective communicator. He wrote over 600 weekly columns for the *Listener* on aspects of English usage which were immensely popular and full of sound commonsense as well as linguistic scholarship. He also wrote articles on English usage for the *New Scientist*, the *Reader's Digest*, and a magazine called *The World of English* distributed widely in China. Like Elizabeth Gordon, whose articles are the focus of this issue, he was a great PR person for Linguistics.

It will be clear that throughout his long career Ian Gordon was a strong supporter of research and teaching in English Language and Linguistics. He provided an encouraging academic and administrative context for the development of Linguistics as a distinct discipline at Victoria and eventually as a major subject with its own distinct Department. This took a very tangible form when, in 2003, he made a generous endowment of \$500,000 through the Victoria University of Wellington Foundation, to establish the I.A. Gordon Fellowship to support the study of English Language in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies. It is this bequest which made it possible to bring Associate Professor Elizabeth Gordon to Wellington as the

2008 Ian Gordon Fellow to celebrate English Language research in a way that he would have approved of.

Elizabeth Gordon (no relation despite the shared surname) is a sociolinguist known especially for her work on the origins and evolution of New Zealand English. In addition to her many scholarly books and papers in this area, she is widely known (as was Ian Gordon) as a skilled communicator, explaining complex linguistic matters in clear and direct language and generating enthusiasm about language issues wherever she talks. The articles in this volume are based on the warmly received lectures she gave in her capacity as the 2008 Ian Gordon Fellow.