

In Memoriam

**A LIFE OF SERVICE TO STUDENTS AND THE ARTS:
Associate Professor Elizabeth May Perkins OAM**



Elizabeth Perkins passed away peacefully at the Wesley Park Haven Hospital in Townsville on 17 February after a long period of ill health. She is mourned by her sisters, Dorothy and Florence Perkins, by her godchildren Laura, Robert and Mike, by the students and staff of James Cook University, by theatrical and arts communities in Townsville, and by literary academics throughout Australia.

Elizabeth was born in Brisbane on 8 April 1933, the eldest child of the late James Alexander and Ivy Blanche Perkins, to a family which had produced teachers, academics and Anglican priests. Her great uncle, the Rev. Frederick Thomas Perkins founded Cranbrook boys' school in Rose Bay, Sydney.

Elizabeth was educated at Clayfield College in Brisbane and at the University of Queensland. After completing her BA in 1953 she was employed as a resident teacher at the Presbyterian Ladies College in Warwick, where her friend, the distinguished poet and critic Dorothy Green, was principal. Elizabeth completed a Bachelor of Education degree by correspondence as well as a Licentiate of Speech and Drama (AMEB). Aged twenty-six, she became deputy principal at the school.

After a year in which she taught matriculation students at the Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne, Elizabeth moved back to Brisbane in 1965 to complete a first class Honours degree in English literature at the University of Queensland. She became a friend of the poet, Judith Wright, and from time to time took care of her house at Mount Tambourine. While working part-time as a tutor and research assistant at the University of Queensland, she commenced an MA thesis on an earlier great Australian poet, Charles Harpur.

In 1970, at the invitation of the then Professor of English, the late Colin Roderick, Elizabeth took up a lectureship at James Cook University in Townsville. She completed her MA on Harpur in 1972 and in 1983 her PhD thesis on Australian drama. She was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1978 and to Associate Professor in 1985, one of the first women at the university to reach

that academic rank. From 1986 to 1988 Elizabeth often flew to Canberra to fulfill her duties as a member of the Literature Board of the Australia Council. After several appointments as Acting Head of the English Department, she retired from the university at the end of 1996. In 2002 she was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia for services to the Arts.

Elizabeth was an inspired scholar who published many articles and chapters on Australian literature, as well as a definitive edition from the manuscripts of Harpur's works. She collaborated as editor with the Townsville poet Robert Handicott, to produce an anthology of regional poetry entitled *North of Capricorn*. She was dramaturge for several plays by another close friend, the major Australian playwright, Alma De Groen. Elizabeth had a warm relationship, too, with the novelist Thea Astley, and published articles on her work. Yet another book, on Tom Inglis Moore, a pioneer of Australian literary scholarship, is due to be published in a few weeks.

Elizabeth received the OAM for service to the Arts, and many people remember with gratitude her immense contribution to the Townsville cultural scene. She and a student, David Foott, conceived of *LiNQ* as linking literature and literary studies in North Queensland with the wider world. Together with Gordon Inskip, David and Elizabeth produced the first issue in September 1971. Elizabeth co-edited the journal for many years, and regularly contributed articles and reviews. She also helped to organize the English Language Literature Association (ELLA), a body which sponsored performances and talks by distinguished writers, thus forging productive friendships between lovers of literature at the university and in the community.

Her contributions to drama were just as impressive. She directed and acted for the Townsville Little Theatre, and wrote two plays successfully performed by TLT casts. She also wrote delightful musicals for school casts at St Margaret Mary's and St Anthony's schools. These were directed by the then principal, Elizabeth's great friend, Pam Lythgo. Elizabeth was a member of the board of the New Moon Theatre, and an enthusiastic supporter of Tropic Line Theatre, now Tropic Sun.

Elizabeth was a born teacher, who enriched the lives of generations of undergraduates with her wisdom and her love of literature. She supervised MA and PhD theses, not just in Australian literature and drama, but in Middle English literature and the creative arts. Under her supervision, students from China and Iran who began with a limited grasp of English succeeded in completing advanced degrees. Elizabeth Perkins was a loved teacher and friend to many. She will be deeply missed.

Cheryl Taylor