

OBITUARY

Emeritus Professor Kenneth Raymond Dutton AM

(4 March 1938 - 27 February 2026)

Kenneth Raymond Dutton AM

MA (Syd), Docteur de l'Université (Paris), Hon DLitt (Newcastle), FRSN, FACE, Officier de l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques, Médaille de la Ville de Paris

Kenneth Raymond Dutton's (**Ken**) dedication to French language and literature was such that he became the second Australian ever admitted as officier to the prestigious ranks of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques (July 1985).¹ From early school days in Penshurst, Sydney, to death aged 88, in Newcastle, NSW, his life was punctuated by a deep devotion and love for all things French.

Ken was born on 4 March 1938. His father, was a storeman and packer, who died suddenly when Ken was studying in Paris in 1963. At the time, the passage, time and money mattered. Later, he undertook to care for his mother singlehandedly, never marrying. His only sister Sandra lived in Florida in the USA for decades after marrying an ex-serviceman in the post war years, never returning to Australia and dying within months of their mother in the 1990s.

At Sydney Boys' High School, his outstanding ability in languages emerged prominently and in the Leaving Certificate of 1954, he topped the State in French and took highest marks in the school. He also won that year's Sydney Alliance Française competition, the Concours Général, with an essay and interview on the theme '*Le Voyage*'—the first prize was a month's stay in Nouméa, New Caledonia. That trip changed Ken for life and he would pursue French as his first great obsession in life. Coincidentally, he had just read Jules Verne's *Around the world in 80 Days* (*Autour du Monde en quatre-vingts jours*) and his vocabulary was superb. At the University of Sydney he was taught by Professor Ian Henning, where in 1959 he was awarded first class honours in French, with both English and German as sub-majors, and in 1961, took the University Medal in French for his MA thesis.

During these years, Ken was the French Master at The Cranbrook School and tutored at the University. He fraternised with Angus and Claude Martin and other luminaries in the French language world. Ken was also President and committee member of the Anglican Society at the University, a group linking Anglican staff and students from broad church parishes across the metropolitan area as well as dioceses outside Sydney. It was quite distinct from faith-based groups such as the Student Christian Movement and the Evangelical Union. Towards the end of his life, when some sections of the Church of England changed position on homosexuality, Ken left it to begin a personal process of historical investigation into the spirituality of the early Christian church. This ultimately brought him via the Adamstown (Newcastle) Cell of the Society of the Holy House of Our Lady of Walsingham (a Marian devotion inspired by the 11th-century visions of Richeldis de Faverches in Norfolk, England) then, to the Eastern Orthodox church, into which

¹ I am indebted to several close friends and colleagues of Ken Dutton's for their assistance with this tribute: Dr Jessica Milner-Davis, Dr Marie Ramsland, Laurie Tabart and Dr Jocelyn Chey.

he was received late in life. At St Naum of Ohrid his obsequies took place in accordance with the Eastern Orthodox rite on 12 March 2026.

After graduation, Ken won the 1962 J. B. Watt Travelling Scholarship at the University of Sydney. Together with other awards, this enabled him to study for his doctoral studies at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), at the Sorbonne in Paris. For a time, he lived and breathed the famous address at 45 rue d'Ulm in the Latin Quarter. His supervisor was a titled *Professeur a la Sorbonne* Robert Ricatte. In those years, he spied Jean-Paul Sartre at Gibert et Fils the Sorbonne bookshop and went to concerts when Jacques Brel was an emerging artist. Focussing on the spirituality of modern French poets including Paul Valéry, he completed his degree of Docteur de l'Université in 1964 with *mention très honorable*. He wore the distinctive doctoral robes of the Sorbonne trimmed in ermine with aplomb at Graduations, including for his formal photographic portrait as Emeritus Professor of French.² He was the Chair of French between 1968 to 1998, but also, variously, was Dean of Arts, Dean of Students, Student Ombudsman, Vice-Principal, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, member of the University of Newcastle Council, Deputy Chancellor, Deputy Chair of the Academic Senate and President of Alumni (Warden of Convocation). In 2001, the University gave him *honoris causa* Doctor of Letters.

After the Sorbonne, Ken returned to Sydney University in 1964 as Teaching Fellow and then Lecturer in French. He resided at St Paul's College within the University of Sydney under the Wardenship of A. P. B. (Peter) Bennie and where he was the Senior Tutor in 1965 for some years. He also took responsibility for the College's Mansfield Library. A concern for libraries was characteristic of the man who valued their role in preserving and sharing knowledge. Ken enjoyed college life and was celebrated on leaving as the "Ken of the College" such was his devotion to the institution. It was at St Paul's that Ken acquired the first of a series of luxury sedan cars (an old Bentley, he graduated to BMWs later): it no doubt contributed to his popularity with friends and students alike in an era when car ownership was still rare. Among other accomplishments Dutton produced cutting-edge Theatre of the Absurd plays at the Union Theatre. It was here that he began to hone his magnificent memories of librettos of opera and pages of French literature, by heart.

In 1967, when Macquarie University was established, as a centre for teaching modern languages, the humanities and pure sciences, he was appointed Senior Lecturer in French. The staff at once elected him as a member of the first University Council. He published articles from his doctoral thesis and played a leading role in campus life. He also wrote his book on phonetics, *Spoken French: A Guide to phonetic theory and practice* (Angus and Robertson: 1968) for which he was known.

In 1968, aged 30, Ken was appointed to the Chair in French at the University of Newcastle NSW after the retirement of foundation professor Kelter Hayward Hartley, and he rapidly rose to eminence in that bustling old steel town with a new university. He would spend the rest of his career and life there, often referring to himself as a true Novocastrian. In 1987, he was considered a possible candidate for appointment as the Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University, but this was not to be. Ken's friend and fellow Sydney University alumnus, the Hon. Michael Kirby, was then Chancellor of Macquarie University. Ken suspected that other factors also conspired against him,

² Dutton later authored a short history of academic costume, *Academic Dress: A Brief Guide to its Origins and Development* (Hunter Valley Branch of the Australian Federation of University Women and Convocation of the University of Newcastle: 1983). This originated in a 1981 dinner address, "Town and Gown", to the AFUW (Hunter Valley), in support of the Friends of the University of Newcastle.

leaving him to deal with the life he had chosen in Newcastle. Academia could be a Machiavellian world.

In his role as Professor of French, Ken had three focal points: encouraging research and publishing, being involved in French activities in the community and effective teaching of French the modern language. Ken's own teaching involved drawing on his University of Sydney experience in producing and acting in plays performed in French: Molière's *L'Avare*, Jean Giraudoux's *L'Apollon de Bellac*, and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* and Ionesco's *La Leçon*. This brought him into contact with Newcastle's fine programs in drama and music.

Ken Dutton's predecessor, Kelter Hayward Hartley (1909-1988), was an eccentric academic who lived in retirement in obscure penury, who nevertheless managed at his death to leave the University of Newcastle an extraordinary gift (some \$1M in 1989) designed to further its French programs. Kelter Hartley in his retirement had become a share market speculator but lived like the proverbial church mouse, he became asset rich.³ As Hartley's successor, Ken inherited responsibility for the valuable gift and took up a formal role as Director of the Kelter Hartley Bequest Program. Ken was well placed, with his experience for years on the NSW Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee.

In the late 1990s, the Hartley Prize was the most prestigious scholarship in Australia of its kind next to the Rhodes. The first recipients in 1995 were allowed to follow a carefully prescribed six-month program in France like the old travelling scholarships. Later, the Hartley Scholars also benefitted from the extraordinary generosity of French writer and film-maker Jean-Paul Delamotte AM (1931-2013) and his wife Monique, friends of Dutton, whose mansion just outside the western limits of Paris in Boulogne-Billancourt provided a hub for visiting Australians known as '*Studio Ici-Aussie*'.⁴ In the 1970s, Ken had appointed Jean-Paul as tutor in French (native-speaker), after noting that his unusual application included a personal letter of reference from Eugène Ionesco. In the 1980s after returning to Paris, the Delamottes formed the Association Culturelle Franco-Australienne (ACFA) and their efforts to encourage Franco-Australian relations which came under strain with the Mururoa Atoll testing were endorsed by Gough and Margaret Whitlam among others.⁵ Literary and artistic luminaries from Australia flocked to Paris: Lloyd Rees, Nancy Cato, Tim Winton, Peter Weir...

Granted a personal chair in 1982, Ken served on both the Academic Senate and on Newcastle University Council, he served as a Member of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee Research Sub-Committee and in was commissioned to write a report on Library Storage which influenced a national university policy on the subject. He was President of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association (AULLA, 1978-79) and became a Fellow and Life Member of the Australian College of Educators (then Education).

³ *Kelter Hartley. A Memoir*, ed. Kenneth R. Dutton (The Kelter Hartley Bequest Program, Department of Modern Languages, University of Newcastle, NSW, 1995).

⁴ https://www.amherst.edu/news/magazine/in_memory/1952/jeanpauldelamotte (accessed 30 August 2026).

⁵ Marie Ramsland. 2023. *Reciprocity: A Celebration of the Life of Jean-Paul Delamotte*. ETT Imprint.

As chair of the University of Newcastle's Animal Care and Ethics Committee, Ken developed an interest in the science of the body which led to the publication of seven very popular co-authored books on weight training. His outstanding book, *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Physical Development* (Cassell: 1995), examines physical development, cultural history, aesthetic theory and theology – the last a subject which remained of central concern all his life. Ken Dutton also served on the Council of St John's Theological College, Morpeth from 1999 to 2002, and was an Examining Chaplain to the Anglican Bishop of Newcastle (1997-2002) and a member of the Board of Theology for Charles Sturt University (2000-2005).

Twice President of the Alliance Française de Newcastle and Vice President of the Fédération des Alliances Françaises en Australie, Dutton was appointed an Officier des Palmes Académiques in 1984 and, in 1997, the Médaille de la Ville de Paris was presented to him by Hélène Macé de Lépinay (niece of Charles de Gaulle) in the Hotel de Ville Paris, for his contribution to French Australian cultural relations (at that time the only other Australian recipient of the medal was the artist Lloyd Rees). He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2004 for 'services to tertiary education and French Studies' and in 2011 elevated to membership of the Order of Australia (AM) for 'service to tertiary education as an administrator and academic and through contributions to the development of international engagement in Australian higher education'.

In the years after Ken retired from the University (1998), Pierre de Ronsard's line *Le temps s'en va, le temps s'en va, Madame*⁶, was often repeated by him...*time flies, Madame, time flies!* Ken remained mindful of how short life can be – but a fleeting moment, and he lamented his friends dying one by one. Ken maintained his active social life and scholarly aptitude. For the years leading up to his death, his years were occupied by religious exegesis, deep thought, prayer and translation from the classical Greek religious texts to the modern English. Ken's attachment to and involvement in the civic, religious and intellectual life of Newcastle continued.

In 2000, he published the definitive biography of the remarkable man who led Newcastle University College to independence from the University of NSW – J. J. (James) Auchmuty, Irish exile, academic, man of the people, wily administrator and spy.⁷ Later in life, Dutton in fact concentrated on biography and translation with a particular interest in local Australian history. A Fellow of the Royal Society of New South Wales, he joined in 2019 at the time of the establishment of its Hunter Branch and *the Royal Society*, he contributed an insightful piece on a rare manuscript connected to an early 19th century commandant of the Newcastle penal settlement.⁸ One longer study interpreted an obscure manuscript held in the University of Newcastle library that contained both a military treatise in French and a pioneer diary in English. The result was Dutton's biography of "that gallant gentleman" Colonel Charles George Gray, a Port Macquarie settler who served as

⁶ Pierre de Ronsard Poete (1555)

⁷ Kenneth R. Dutton. 2000. *Auchmuty: The Life of James Johnston Auchmuty (1909-1981)*. Mt Nebo, QLD: Boombana Publications.

⁸ K. R. Dutton. 2020. [The Skottowe manuscript and the Cook connection](#), *Journal & Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, 153: 156-163.

Parliamentary Librarian and Usher of the Black Rod to the first Queensland Parliament.⁹ Dutton became official historian for that pillar of the Newcastle establishment, 'The Newcastle Club, sorting and cataloguing its valuable library which now bears his name, valuing its traditions and recording its history.¹⁰

Always a fine actor, Ken had a remarkable singing voice and those who heard his 2004 invited recitals of Schubert's song-cycle *Winterreise* (24 songs in German) for the local University of the Third Age (U3A) music appreciation group will not forget the uplifting experience. He accompanied this with a lecture series on *Winterreise* for the 2005 Newcastle U3A class. Even late in life, Dutton remained in demand as a guest speaker for community-based bodies, including Rotary International, Legacy, church groups, professional bodies (medical and legal practitioners), high school, college and university graduations. His home in retirement was in "The Menkens", a converted historic bond store close to the Customs House, named for Newcastle architect Frederick B. Menkens (1855-1910). There, Ken Dutton created an elegant Parisian-style pied-a-terre with Newcastle dockland views where visitors enjoyed his sparkling intelligence and wit as he could offer it and where this contemporary "gallant gentleman" departed from life in his sleep on the night of 26 and 27 February 2026.

Et in aeternam Frater, Ave atque Vale!

Catullus *Carmina* 101¹¹

Kevin Peter Tang St Paul's College (2000-2003)

⁹ K. R. Dutton. 2010. *That Gallant Gentleman: The Remarkable Story of Colonel Charles George Gray*. Rockhampton, QLD: Central Queensland University Press.

¹⁰ K. R Dutton. 2010. *Splendid Companions: The Newcastle Club 1885-2010*. Newcastle, NSW: The Newcastle Club.

¹¹ As the Roman Poet Catullus said, having travelled to his own brother's funeral in a distant land far away from Rome, he arrived just in time at the graveside, "And forever, Brother, Hail and Farewell!..."