Obituary

Kenneth Raymond Dutton OAM, AM, MA (Syd), DUniv (Paris), Hon DLit (Newc), FRSN, FACE, Officier dans l'ordre des Palmes Académiques, Médaille de la cité de Paris (b. 1938-d. 2026)

Kenneth Raymond (Ken) Dutton was dedicated to French language and literature. One of two siblings, he was born on 4 March 1938. He lost his father, a storeman and packer, when he was studying in Paris in 1963 and cut his time there short in order to return home as soon as possible. He never married and later in life, after his sister Sandra's death, devotedly took on responsibility for his mother. At Sydney Boys' High School, he showed an outstanding ability in languages and in the Leaving Certificate of 1954 topped the State in French and took highest marks overall in the school. He also won that year's Sydney Alliance Française competition, the Concours Général, with an essay entitled 'Le voyage'. Appropriate as the prize was a month's stay in Nouvelle Caledonie/New Caledonia. He studied at the University of Sydney 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 his student years, he supported himself by teaching French at Cranbrook School and by University tutoring. Ken was 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. Ken retained his deep religious faith all his life, although it was at the cost of ever fully realising his own innate sexuality. Towards the end of his life, when some sections of the Church of England changed position on homosexuality while some did not, 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) to the Eastern Orthodox church, into which he was received late in life after his Newcastle church, St Stephen's Adamstown, was closed. Ken managed to extract from it a sanctuary lamp dedicated in honour of his mother and (after a battle), this was placed in his new church, St. Naum of Ohrid, in the Serbian Orthodox rite, at Broadmeadow. Here his obsequies were celebrated in a moving service on 12 March 2026.

After graduation, Ken won the 1962 J. B. Watt Travelling Scholarship. Together with other awards, this enabled him to study for his doctorate at the École normale supérieure (ENS), Sorbonne. His thesis dealt with the spirituality of modern French poets including Paul Valéry and he received prized *mention très honorable* for his Docteur de l'Université in 1964. He wore his handsome set of doctoral robes with great distinction on suitable academic occasions, including for his formal photographic portrait as Emeritus Professor of French.[1] This now hangs at the University of Newcastle where he served not only as Chair of French from 1968 to 1988, but also, inter alia, as Dean of Arts, Dean of Students, Student Ombudsman, Vice-

[1] 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.

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 admitted him *honoris causa* to the degree of Doctor of Letters.

Returning from the Sorbonne in 1964, Ken became Teaching Fellow and then Lecturer in French at Sydney University. He joined St Paul's as Senior Tutor in 1965 and took responsibility for the College's library as Honorary Librarian. A concern for libraries was characteristic of the man who valued and wrote about their role in preserving and sharing knowledge. Dutton enjoyed college life to the full. He acquired the first of a series of luxury cars an impressive but secondhand Bentley and produced then cutting-edge Theatre of the Absurd plays at the Union Theatre. When Macquarie University was established in 1967 with a focus on teaching in both the humanities and pure sciences, Dutton was appointed Senior Lecturer in French and immediately elected as staff member on the first University Council. Here he played a leading role in campus life and also wrote a book on phonetics, S*poken French: A Guide to phonetic theory and practice* (Angus and Robertson: 1968) which became the standard text for Australian students of French.

In 1968, aged 30, Dutton was appointed to the Chair in French at the University of Newcastle after the retirement of foundation professor Kelver Hartley (1909-1988). He spent the rest of his career there, often referring to himself as a true Novocastrian. As Professor of French, he chose three focal points: encouraging research and publishing, being involved in French activities in the community and effective teaching – something for which his predecessor had certainly not been noted. Ken's own teaching drew 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 Ionesco's *La Leçon* which brought him into contact with Newcastle's fine programs in drama and music. In July 1985, Dutton became the second Australian ever admitted as officier to the prestigious ranks of the Ordre des Palmes Académiques.

Dutton's predecessor, Kelver Hartley, was an eccentric academic who lived in obscure penury in retirement but nevertheless managed to leave the University of Newcastle an extraordinary gift (worth over $A1M in 1989) designed to further its French programs. Whilst living like the proverbial church mouse,[2] he had entrusted his entire superannuation and savings to clever wealth managers. Dutton inherited responsibility for the bequest and took up a formal role as Director of the Kelver Hartley Bequest Program. His experience on the NSW Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee provided some background and he proved an able administrator, including using the existence of the Bequest and its on-going activities to ward off any threat by university administrators to close down the Department of French as a cost-saving measure – a fate that has overtaken many other small language schools. Seen as the most prestigious scholarship in Australia when first awarded in 1965, the Hartley Scholarship allowed Newcastle students to follow a carefully prescribed six-month program in France.

Despite his erudition, or perhaps because of it, Dutton possessed a robust sense of humour which he brought to most aspects of his life, including his theology and his work as a university

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[2] *Kelver Hartley. A Memoir*, ed. Kenneth R. Dutton (The Kelver Hartley Bequest Program, Department of Modern Languages, University of Newcastle, NSW, 1995).

administrator at Newcastle. Meticulous and impartial on all academic tasks, he was respected by both staff and students, even being elected as Student Ombudsman. In one oral history undertaken for the University of Newcastle he recalled that for six years in the 1980s he served as the sole Vice Principal, with a consequentially huge work load. "If I had been a married man, I couldn't have done it, because I spent every Saturday all day, and every Sunday from 10 a.m., after church, till 1:00 p.m., and I went home for lunch; then back at my desk to keep up with the work." His responsibilities included parking. "If a person parked in the wrong place, they got a ticket on their windscreen which said they were parked in the wrong place and they were fined. It was signed 'K. R. Dutton, Vice-Principal.' One year, the Chancellor—Sir Bede Callaghan, marvellous man—was visiting the University, and he took home with him about 1,000 testamurs, because he signed them individually, so he was not in a good mood. He came out of his office. He came down to his car – to find a notice on it giving him a fine, and he said to the secretaries (and I quote verbatim) 'Tell someone to go to buggary.'" [3] At which Ken laughed uproariously.

Granted a personal chair in 1982, Dutton served on both the Academic Senate and on University Council, taking many committee leadership roles, both within and representing the University. Keenly interested in libraries and archives, 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).

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. 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).

Alongside his authoritative books and articles on French language, French poetry, French teaching and translating of French, Dutton found time to focus on humour. He particularly appreciated the crude but witty humour of medieval French farce, and authored a paper entitled "Farce/Farts" for a special issue of the University of Opole/Polish Academy of Sciences journal *Stylistyka*.[4] This apparently flippant topic, he noted, was worthy of serious academic attention, quoting the great Talmudic scholar Saul Liebermann: "Nonsense (when all is said and done) is still nonsense. But the study of nonsense, that is science."[5]

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[3] K. R. Dutton, Oral history, 3 September 2025, at: https://livinghistories.newcastle.edu.au/nodes/view/119178#idx438976

[4] K. R. Dutton. 2001. Farce/Farts: Divergent Styles of Comedy in Medieval France. *Stylistyka Dzis/Style and Humour,* x: 351-361.

[5] Quoted from Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana Press, 1995, p. 134).

The same serious but playful spirit lay behind his invited entries on Doggerel and on Limericks for the authoritative *Sage Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*.[6] Stressing the sense of transgression traditionally associated with this humorous but strict verse form, Dutton observed that many quite ribald limericks have a religious setting. He joyously illustrated his point with the following example:

> *There was a young lady named Alice*
>
> *Who peed in a Catholic chalice.*
>
> *The Padre agreed*
>
> *'Twas done out of need,*
>
> *And not out of Protestant malice.*

Twice President of the local Alliance française 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), 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 'service 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'.

Ken's attachment to and involvement in the civic, religious and intellectual life of Newcastle and the region was very strong. In 2000, he published the definitive biography of the remarkable man who led Newcastle University College to independence from the University of NSW – James Auchmuty, Irish exile, academic, man of the people, wily administrator and spy.[7] Later in life, Dutton concentrated on biography and translation with a particular interest in local Australian history. A Fellow of the Royal Society of New South Wales from 2019, he contributed to its *Journal and Proceedings* an insightful account of a rare MS connected to an early 19th century commandant of the Newcastle penal settlement.[8] Another longer study interpreted an obscure MS held in the University of Newcastle library that contains 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

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[6] The present writer was responsible for these commissions, the two most enjoyable of the 30 that she edited for the 2-volume *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications., 2014).

[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.

as Parliamentary Librarian and Usher of the Black Rod to the first Queensland Parliament.[9] Dutton also became official historian for 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 music appreciation group of the Newcastle University of the Third Age (U3A) 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). Here Dutton created an elegant Parisian-style apartment with a Newcastle dockland view where visitors enjoyed his lively hospitality for as many years as he could offer it and where this contemporary "gallant gentleman" departed from life in his sleep between 26 and 27 February 2026.

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[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.