

JOHN MANSFIELD THOMSON

On 12 September 1999, John Mansfield Thomson, founding and most recent editor of New Zealand Studies, died after serious illness. Vincent O'Sullivan, Director of the Stout Research Centre, delivered this eulogy at the memorial service in Old St Paul's, Wellington, on 15 September.

NONE OF US CAN SPEAK for another's grief. But one can say something of one's own, that may at least coincide with what others feel. And so I speak now from one segment of that vast circle that reaches to Australia and England and several other countries, and that takes in those of us here today – the circle of John's extensive friendships; those of us touched by his rare and vivid personality. And more particularly, those who saw him several times a week, over many years, at the Stout Research Centre at Victoria University.

As one of John's closest friends remarked a few days ago, the Centre was his spiritual home. He held the first Stout Fellowship in 1984, soon after his return from

Britain, when he worked on his *Oxford History of New Zealand*



A charcoal drawing of John Mansfield Thomson, by Evelyn Page, February 1974. ATL Collection F165529 1/2.

Music. He has had a room at the Centre ever since. He was on the

advisory board for many years. He arranged conferences, and edited their proceedings. He founded the Centre's journal *New Zealand Studies*, taking it from modest beginnings to as handsome a publication as you'll find in the country. Even until last week, its business was still very much his business. Whatever value the Centre has, owes much to his commitment. Visiting scholars who met him casually, would leave a few months later as his friends. One director after another found him wise and collegial. Only once did I pick up the slightest hint of strain. In the most courteous way, he did not quite approve of our conference last year on 'Sport, Society, and Culture.' He felt that one of the words was quite out of place. But then sport, you might say, was not high on

John's agenda. He took my recent suggestion that he couldn't be contacted for three Saturday afternoons in a row because he was secretly watching rugby as 'a very naughty remark'. The gift of his presence at the Stout for over fifteen years was an enormous one. He was a repository of knowledge about so much, and taught many of us, even the most intractable, about music, design, typography, publishing, biography, about the life and manners of his time. To talk with John was so often memorable, so often instructive, and as many of us are glad to say, so often mildly sybaritic. To use a phrase that is currently much over-used, but in his case, so richly appropriate – John Thomson was a one-man centre of excellence.

He was also one of the few New Zealanders, I suppose, whose story could have been told by Henry James. For his was a generosity steeped in style, an expansiveness tempered by taste, a man for whom friendship was, indeed, a way of life. He was one of the few who kept up letter writing as an amicable art. It is a great pity that a man who wrote so well and generously about others, wrote so little about himself. For when he did, there was often a Jamesian irony to his pen. As when he described one of his first jobs in London after the war, as a copy typist for an export company. 'I typed invoices for hairclips for India while that coun-

try underwent the paroxysms of riots.' Or as I remember him at Laufen, a small village across the border from Salzburg, where we shared adjoining rooms. We were woken at 6.30am by the extraordinary vehemence of a brass band that seemed to be made up entirely of tubas – the preliminary to a local wedding. Within a few bars, John was at my door in his dressing gown. 'My dear Vince,' he said, 'what are we going to do about the Germans?' But later that day as we walked round Salzburg, it was his eye, and his ear, that enlivened it for me.

Sometimes John reminded one of Wilde's defining sane political balance as voting with the liberals, but dining with the conservatives. Not that most of us who dined with John, and were gently tutored by him in the intricacies of the palate, were by any means conservative. But John did manage a rare balance. A bon vivant, and yet deeply egalitarian; an aesthete and a scholar by temperament, yet also, should you touch on the matter, a man who detested the notion of assumed privilege. Much as he loved New Zealand, he was exasperated by much that went on here, and in particular by the depredations of generic managers. Tired as he was in his last six months, he nevertheless was energetic in his resistance to what he called the Visigoths in the National Library, in broadcasting, in the University. We'll all remember, I expect, his

final phrase of disapproval – 'it's simply monstrous.'

For John was a passionate man about what he valued. As Dryden said, 'What passion cannot music raise and quell?' Many of us know, I expect, his moments of righteous indignation when he felt the line was not being toed. As an eminent English musician said to him some years ago, 'I think it perfectly splendid, John, the number of people you're not talking to as a matter of principle.' But that passionate response to things was one of the qualities that made us love him, made him the rare spirit he was. In his last few weeks, we would also need to add 'courage' to what so defined him. Our being here in such numbers today declares one fact so clearly – he made Wellington a finer place, as he touched our lives with that lovely open directness of his friendship, his courtesy and his sense of humour, his belief in community, his delight in the good things shared.

I know one says that we can celebrate friendship, even when it's over. And yet there is no glossing over the immediacy of loss. That moment, as the poet Louis MacNeice said, when we are forced to take on board a profound change in how things are; the difference between the silence after music, and the silence when there is no more music. ☞