

○ OBITUARY

PROFESSOR WILGA RIVERS

Professor Wilga Rivers, who died in the US in June 2007 at the age of 88, did more than anyone else to put Australian applied linguistics on the map. Although she lived and worked abroad for nearly half her life, she retained a strong Australian identity and accent and was proud of her beginnings in the western suburbs of Melbourne. The first volume of her memoirs *Down under/up top: Creating a life* (2004), the only one she lived to complete, is a remarkably detailed and evocative account of her education and early teaching. Educated at Essendon High School, MacRobertson Girls' High School and the University of Melbourne, she majored in French. She was one of the first students at the Victorian School of Languages (then called the Saturday School of Languages) when it started in 1935. She became an inspiring, highly successful and much-loved teacher of French in Victorian country and metropolitan schools. Her urge to further her studies and develop a research career led to an M.A. (Melbourne), an L. ès L. at Montpellier and a Ph.D. from Illinois. Her ground-breaking Illinois thesis constituted a critique of audio-lingualism, which was becoming the dominant approach to language teaching. The published version, *The psychologist and the foreign language teacher*, caused a stir in applied linguistics throughout the world.

After completing her studies at Illinois, Wilga returned to Australia in 1971 to take up a lectureship in French at Monash University, then in its fourth year of existence. Monash pioneered the teaching of linguistics and the inclusion of second-language acquisition and teaching as part of the professional agenda of a language department. Curriculum development and leadership in language programs in French gave Wilga an important function and also an opportunity to put her research into practice. It was ironical that part of her job was to set up audio-lingual courses in the language laboratory. To a department that made many innovations in the university teaching of French, Wilga brought the great advantage of her knowledge of North American organisation of graduate work. This made her a key participant in what was effectively the first M.A. by coursework and minor thesis to be offered in any subject in Australia. She was in great demand as a supervisor in the fast-developing postgraduate programs and as a keynote speaker at conferences all over Australia. She was subsequently promoted to senior lecturer and then associate professor.

She established and ran the Language Laboratory Section (later the Language Laboratory and Language Teaching Workshop) of the Australasian Universities Language

and Literature Association (AULLA), the main gathering of Australian and New Zealand language and literature academics, which was dominated by Literature. It was out of this section that ALAA was founded, under the presidency of Ross Steele.

But Wilga's expertise was in much greater demand in the rest of the world, especially in the US, undoubtedly the leader in applied linguistics at the time. In 1967, she took up a visiting professorship at the Teachers' College of Columbia University. After a brief return to Monash, Wilga accepted a full professorship at the University of Illinois and in 1974 became one of the first women to be appointed a full professor at Harvard, a post she held until her retirement in 1989. She was responsible for the coordination of language programs, the training of junior staff, and the teaching of applied linguistics within the Department of Romance Languages. It was to her program innovations that a 66% increase in foreign-language enrolments at Harvard had been attributed. She was an inspiring lecturer and mentor, who was constantly invited to speak at national and international conferences, in fact in 43 countries.

She published 13 books, including *The psychologist and the foreign language teacher*, *Teaching foreign language skills*, *Communicating naturally in a foreign language*, and *Interactive language teaching*, and jointly authored books on teaching specific languages. In addition, she authored over 80 book chapters and articles. Her work is set apart by her exceptional gift for the clear organisation and exposition of quite complex topics. She received many awards and distinctions, including the Most Distinguished Leadership teaching award of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. *Down under/up top* gives more than one insight into the sensitivity and practical intelligence she displayed in her approach to teaching at all levels.

Wilga continued to supervise graduate students in linguistics and teach an Extension Course on the Theory and Practice of Language Teaching until the age of 85. Prior to the serious illness which resulted in her death, Wilga visited Australia annually but she never came back to live.

— *Michael Clyne and Wallace Kirsop*