

Award of Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters

Professor Peter Steele

Poet and scholar, Professor and Jesuit priest, Peter Daniel Steele is one of the most remarkable figures in Australian writing. His darting imagination throws its kaleidoscopic colours over everything he does. Steele grew up in Perth, coming east for his religious training and for his study at this University. At once brilliant and extremely modest, he went on to write his doctoral thesis, and subsequent book, on Jonathan Swift. However, the eighteenth century did not hold him long in its toils: of his next two prose books, one, *Expatriates: Reflections on Modern Poetry* (1985), is a study of poetry, especially that of the Americans, while the other is *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self on Show* (1989). "Show" is the key word here, given Steele's longstanding fascination with the performative, the ostensible, the ludic; he has even written that "God's folly is to be where fools are". The author of a monograph on his work points to its focus on the jester, whether that figure be wise or intriguingly foolish.

Peter Steele went on to teach in the English Department here, coming to hold a Personal Chair. Except for six years as Provincial of the Jesuit Order in Australia, he has been a member of this Department ever since. He has also been Visiting Professor at the University of Alberta, at Georgetown University in Washington DC, and at Loyola University Chicago. He has given the Martin D'Arcy Lectures in Arts and Sciences at the University of Oxford, and he is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

But Steele is a poet, one whose style, at once dense and light, resembles nobody else's. From his early *Word from Lilliput* through three more volumes these poems have taken modernist allusion and passionate irony in new directions, presided over by his Christian belief, of course, but also by the genial spirits of Montaigne and Cervantes. His beautiful 2003 collection, *Plenty*, draws its readers into the tantalizing realm of ekphrastic poetry, a country whose poems have their origins in works of visual art. This kind of parallel, or metaphorical cousinage, has occupied him deeply of late, and a second such book is expected soon.

Steele's creative work has fed constantly back into his innovative teaching, much as his recent volume of homilies interweaves with his continuing life as a priest. He has taught new courses in autobiography, travel writing and "writing the city", amid much else. Every kind of discourse he touches bears his own ardent, uniquely playful stamp; his depth finds itself in intellectual speed, in a whole archipelago of analogies.

The reputation of Peter Steele burgeoned gradually, given his innate modesty, but his writing has changed many expectations about what Australian literature has to offer. In this country, but also in the United States and elsewhere, his influence flourishes in many corners, on many campuses. Moreover, his creative energy is unabating.