Mr Peter Porter
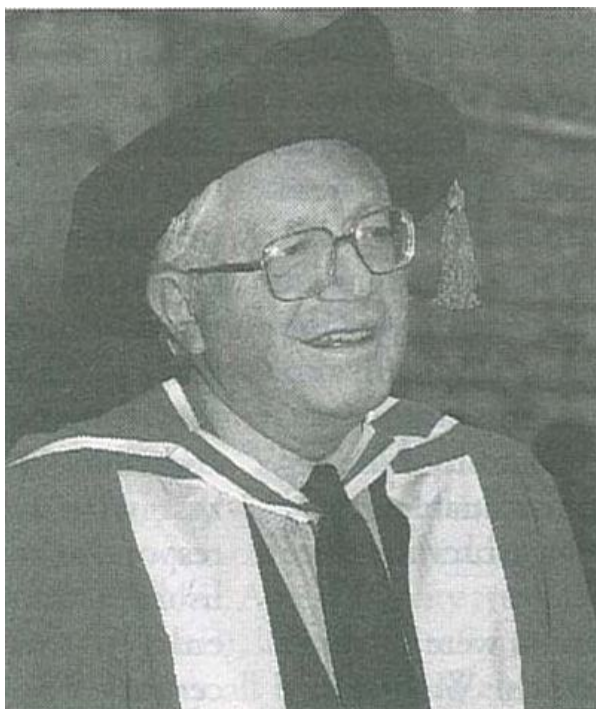
The degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa)* was conferred upon Australian poet Peter Porter at an Arts ceremony held on 4 June 1999.

Peter Porter, *photo, Melissa Latham, 'The University of Sydney News', 10 June 1999, University of Sydney Archives.*

Citation

Chancellor,

I have the honour to present Peter Porter, Australian poet, for the conferring of the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) .

Peter Porter was born in Brisbane in 1929 and belongs to that generation of highly talented Australians who sought and made their fortunes and reputations in Britain. After working in Brisbane, he sailed for England in 1951, an England where Australians were best known as soldiers and sportsmen, and where he survived in a variety of callings before becoming a full time writer in 1968.

Peter Porter had been writing plays and poems well before he left Australia, but his first book of poems, *Once Bitten, Twice Shy*, was published in Britain in 1961. Since then, he has published some twenty books of poetry as well as editing other volumes, including T*he Oxford Book of Modem Australian Verse.* He has also engaged in collaborative works with painters such as Arthur Boyd and composers like Don Banks. A literary critic as well as poet, Peter Porter writes regularly for a wide range of journals including the *New Statesman*, the *Observer*, *The Times Literary Supplement, Encounter* and *The London Review of Books*. This year, Oxford University Press is celebrating Peter Porter's seventieth birthday with the issue of a new edition of the poems he has written over the past forty years.

The English poet, Stephen Spender, rightly wrote many years ago that Porter's poems issue forth from 'an immensely fertile, lively, informed, honest and penetrating mind'. Peter himself has described writers as creators of records of how individual imaginations have coped with their experiences. He has turned his imagination and reflection on experience, experience that is both lived and mediated through literature and art, to create poetry that is grounded in the reality in which we all must live.

Peter Porter's poetry blurs the margin and centre in a postcolonial world, and his vocabulary is multinational. His poems are distinguished by his immersion in European culture and its ironies, by his passion for music and for Italian Renaissance painting. But they are also filled with images, moments and reflections of Australian life and juxtapositions of Europe and Australia. I quote some lines from his poem, *On First Looking at Chapman's Hesiod*.

Hesiod's father, caught in a miserable village,
Not helped by magic names like Helicon,
Sailed to improve his fortunes, and so did
All our fathers - in turn, their descendants
Lacked initiative, other than the doctors' daughters
Who tripped to England.
...
Long storms have blanched the million bones
Of the Aegean, and as many hurricanes
Will abrade the headstones of my native land:
Sparrows acclimatize but I still seek
The permanently upright city where
Speech is nature and plants conceive in pots,
Where one escapes from where one is and who
One was, where home is just a postmark
And country wisdom clings to calendars,
The opposite of a sunburnt truth-teller's
Wodd, haunted by precepts and the Pleiades.

Peter Porter's contribution to English literature has been widely and publicly acknowledged - by the award of the Whitbread Poetry Prize in 1988, the Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society in 1990, the Age Poetry Prize in 1997 and by an Emeritus Award of the Australia Council in 1998. It is fitting that, in this the year of his seventieth birthday, the University of Sydney recognise an Australian poet whose writing has enriched literature in the English language, and who, as it happens, twenty five years ago, was a writer in residence in the University.

Chancellor, I have great pleasure in presenting Peter Porter to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) and I invite you to confer the degree upon him.