Olivier MacDonagh, one of the most creative historians of his generation, died on Sunday 22 May 2002, aged 77. He had married the William Keir Hancock Professor of History in the Research School of Social Sciences in The Australian National University between 1971-1990.

Born in Ireland, he held degrees from University College Dublin and the University of Cambridge. He had also been associated with the Irish Society, and was a Fellow and Honorary Fellow of St Catherine's College, Cambridge. Before coming to Australia with his wife, Carmel and their young family, he was Professor of Modern History at University College, Cork. In Australia he helped design Flinders University and became Foundation Professor of History.

He was a quietly formidable, independent thinker, immensely learned with instant recall, armed with a quiet but gentleness, often wrote with style, original, powerful and elegant. His Pattern of Government Growth [1961] on the British Passenger Acts of the 19th Century, implied to make sea travel less hazardous immediately displayed a gift of great historians — the distinctive vision and passion to take what might seem at first sight to be a small subject and recreate it as a startling piece of historical experience and a major illumination on public policy-making. This first of MacDonagh’s books developed in Europe and North America. His study of the reformer, Sir Jeremiah Fryer, and pioneered investigations into late 18th-century social policy. MacDonagh’s State of Mind [1985], a short study of modern Irish history remains remarkable for its conceptual breadth of the island and the selected sectarian past and Irish-British relations. It won the Ewart Biggs Memorial Prize. His life of Daniel O’Connell was a landmark in Irish biography which he was both accounted for and disposed of, and ‘The Liberator’ and his wife emerged as human beings more flamboyant, charming and politically effective than ever in their Romantic ambience. The Sharing of the Green: A Modern Irish History for Australians [1996] sought to emancipate Australians and Americans from the nostalgic romance and the destructive tribal myths preserved among their families and in school texts. MacDonagh also wrote one of the best books about Jane Austen — a volume in the history of Guinness, the frankness of which upset the company.

He also wrote good poetry and his public readings of Seamus Heaney, Yeats — which he knew by heart — are treasured. He had a love for Bloom and a volume in the history of Guinness, the frankness of which upset the company.

Olivier MacDonagh was a very private, devout Catholic; although sometimes dissatisfied with the doings of the Vatican. He was a splendid teacher, especially good with graduate students, several of whom now hold chairs around the world. With his colleague in the History Department, Research School of Social Sciences, Ken Ingleby—a senior academic—MacDonagh enriched the Australian Bicentennial with the 11 volume Australians — An historical dictionary. The concept was highly original and its volumes, devoted to the history of Australia from the Ice-Age to the present, told — after the European invasion — in one-year ‘slices’ at 50-year intervals and the six other volumes devoted to historical statistics, dates, historical geography, maps and bibliographies. The series remains a fundamental source and authority for Australian history around the world. For any such undertaking, the nine-year job was completed on time, partly because it was entrusted, rarely again, to young contributors.

His major contributions to scholarship brought MacDonagh election to four national academies, the British, the Royal Irish, the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Australian Academy of the Social Sciences in which he served as a senior officer bearer.

Olivier is survived by Carmel and their seven children and grandchildren.

Professor F.B. Smith
HISTORY PROGRAM, RISSS