



Elevated chair for a man of poetry

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Barry Spurr ... a voice made for reading poetry. *Photo: James Brickwood*

IT SEEMS fitting that the first person in Australia to hold a professorial chair in poetry and poetics draws on Wordsworth for his job description: "The only way to read a poet is to love him."

Professor Barry Spurr, who was appointed to the position at the University of Sydney this week, is a traditionalist. He has a voice like drought - dry and expansive - and made for reading poetry.

He has spoken, without notes, to thousands of undergraduates, breaking frequently into long recitations. His voice has been raised occasionally to

criticise post-modern texts, dress standards, illiterate first-year students and Australians' idolatry of sport.

When he arrived at the University in 1970 he was a shy Canberra boy, overwhelmed by campus politics. But he found welcome stability in the English department, where - apart from a two-year scholarship to Oxford - he has remained ever since.

Spurr could be described as eccentric. He was one of the last people to conduct his lessons in full academic gown. Realising no one else was doing so, he reverted to coat and tie some time in the 1980s. "That makes you sound terribly hidebound," he says, when called a conservative.

"Let me think how to put it: I don't believe in change for change's sake."

The poet Les Murray wrote a letter of congratulations.

"It is rare to have a person interested in poetry as distinct from the furthering of what you might call Stasi-type criticism in Australia," he says. "In the last 30 years or more, poetry criticism has descended more and more into politics - and a really nasty form of politics."

When the "culture wars" broke out in the 1990s he spoke out against excessive post-modernism in the English syllabus. When John Howard criticised television for a collapse in manners, he was quoted in support.

Spurr says he will use his position to influence the national curriculum and advocate on behalf of the canon.

The dean of the faculty of arts and social sciences, Duncan Ivison, says: "Some say poetry is struggling to survive in the broader public culture. It's alive and well at Sydney [University]."

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