

Obituary

CHARLES BERNARD SCHMITT (1933–86)

The sudden and unexpected death of Charles Schmitt is a distressing personal loss to his many friends. It also represents a major blow to the academic community. Charles Schmitt's phenomenal productivity already established him among major scholars. The best was still to come. Work was well advanced on his vast bibliographical survey of editions and commentaries on Aristotle, which was under preparation for the *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum*. He was also editor of the *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, and was writing a survey of Renaissance philosophy for Oxford University Press. The range, volume, and solidity of his previous publications carried the assurance that these projects would match the standards of the best modern Renaissance scholarship. Although we are deprived of some of his most important work, Charles Schmitt had already fulfilled his ambition to carry forward the tradition of scholarship represented by Paul Oskar Kristeller, and such earlier pioneers as Petersen and Vasoli. The erudition of Charles Schmitt as an editor, biographer, and bibliographer guarantees the permanent reference value of this work. While his compendious grasp of bibliography is a major feature of his output, his horizons were not limited to compilation. Increasingly, his later writings included stimulating and lucid evaluations of important questions relating to the transition from the medieval to the modern worldview. In this field of critical importance he had few peers and no superiors.

What most characterized Charles Schmitt was unyielding integrity and great sense of purpose. At some personal sacrifice he gave up a career in chemical engineering to take up the study of Renaissance philosophy, quite aware that professional philosophers in the Anglo-Saxon world were relapsing into insensitivity towards the writings of philosophy in its traditional sense. The prevailing positivistic mood within the history and philosophy of science also limited the taste for the kind of work he was undertaking. Even the "new wave" in the field of cultural history of the history of science tended to by-pass Charles Schmitt, who felt that fashionable theories concerning the role of hermeticism, or grand theorizing about socio-economic causation, were distorting our understanding of Renaissance thinking. Nevertheless, his later work took on a distinct social historical flavour, and its importance was appreciated by the growing band of historians engaged in the study of intellectual movements, education, publishing, professionalization, or élites.

His later studies concentrated on the arts faculties of universities, which he believed would constitute one of the most reliable barometers of intellectual change. He demonstrated that existing studies insufficiently recognized the complexity of the pattern of intellectual relations existing within the European universities. On the basis of this work he questioned the validity of a great deal of received opinion concerning prevailing trends in Renaissance thought. His contribution will form the source for a great deal of further productive research.

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The high qualities of Charles Schmitt's scholarly contribution failed to earn him the academic position he deserved. But no academic gained higher personal esteem. Countless colleagues and students will testify to being beneficiaries of his assistance, delivered with unstinting generosity, and combined with a brand of sardonic humour which none of us will forget.

Charles Webster