

STATEMENT on Dr Raynor Johnson, Third Master of Queen's

Dr Raynor C. Johnson (1901–1987) was appointed third Master of Queen's College at the University of Melbourne in 1934 and held that office until his retirement at the end of 1964. He was a distinguished physicist by training, gaining no less than three doctorates in the course of his research career (PhD and a DSc from London University, DSc from the University of Melbourne). In the second half of his period as Master his research interests turned to parapsychology and mysticism. He was recognized as an expert on the subject and wrote a number of important and influential books including *The Imprisoned Splendour* (1953) and *Nurslings of Immortality* (1957).

As Master of the College, Johnson was held in great respect by its students and wider community. Former students speak of his outstanding integrity.

“Raynor was a man of great moral strength... He governed the college with integrity.” (Prof. Eric Osborn, funeral address 1987).

“Those of his students who knew him well would agree that rarely, if ever, had they known a man of his intellectual stature and integrity, nor one with such a sincere and genuine concern for people.” (Dr Owen Parnaby, *Centenary History of Queen's College*, p. 244)

“I think Sam [i.e. Dr Johnson] was known to us all as someone of complete integrity, an unusual person of great intellect who was also very approachable.” (Jan Arriens, Student Club President 1964, in *Friends of the Library Occasional Paper* No. 6, May 1998)

Johnson carried out his duties as Master conscientiously and with great pastoral concern for the students in his charge. As access to University education increased in the 1950's and demand for College places grew, Johnson was instrumental in obtaining government support for expansion. As acknowledgement of this success and in order to honour his long-standing contribution to the College community, the Queen's College Council resolved on 14 May 1959 to name after him the west wing that was opened in two stages (1960 and 1968). It is still known as Johnson Wing (often shortened to J-Wing).

In his final years as Master, Johnson began to focus more and more on his research and writing. His preoccupation with psychic research increased and he became obsessed with the quest to achieve true mystical experience. At the end of 1962 he met Mrs Anne Hamilton-Byrne and accepted her as his spiritual master and guide. After his retirement in 1964 he had very little further contact with the College, visiting it on only three occasions.

In 1963, while Johnson was still Master of Queen's, an informal group of devotees started to meet together at Mrs Hamilton-Byrne's home in Ferny Creek in the Dandenongs. Early in 1964 he and his wife purchased a property in the same locality and the meetings were transferred there. These were the beginnings of the group that later became known as the sect or the cult of “the Family”. During this period he also experimented with LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs in his quest for mystical experience. At that time such practices were not illegal.

Johnson was generous by nature and he made a financial contribution to the establishment of the sect's centre on a further property purchased at Ferny Creek. His financial position, however, did not allow him to be a major benefactor.

It is legitimate to regard Johnson as the co-founder, with Mrs Hamilton-Byrne, of the sect known as “the Family”. The theoretical base of the sect's ideology was based on his theological and philosophical views, subtly appropriated and exploited by Mrs Hamilton-Byrne. His name unquestionably added lustre and respectability to the sect's activities. He also defended it in the media when its secretive activities began to attract adverse attention. Through his many public addresses, both in Melbourne and overseas, he recruited members to the sect. However, there is no evidence to suggest that he actively targeted his students or alumni of the College to become members of the group.

From 1965 there were close links between the Family and the Newhaven Psychiatric Hospital in Kew. There is no evidence to link Dr Johnson with the management and operations of the hospital, although he did occasionally visit and was probably aware of the role of the hospital in the Family's drug-taking.

The most controversial and damaging aspect of the sect's activities was the adoption of a large group of young children in the late 1960's and early 1970's, who were brought up as children of Mrs Hamilton-Byrne and her husband Bill. The children were raised in isolation at a property called Kia Lama at Lake Eildon and subjected to systematic and sometimes severe mistreatment, although there is no evidence of sexual abuse. When these activities were exposed in 1987, there was widespread outrage and criminal charges were pursued against members of the sect, with some found guilty of social welfare fraud.

Although Johnson continued to live at Ferny Creek, there is no doubt that he knew about the adoptions (and very likely that some of them were irregular). It appears that, under the influence of Mrs Hamilton-Byrne, he believed that this was being done as a service to society and that it was in the best interests of the children, who would when grown up continue the sect's work. There is no evidence to suggest that he was aware of and condoned the children's mistreatment at Kia Lama and he was never accused of or charged with any criminal activities. In the scathing account of the sect's activities by one of the adopted children, Sarah Hamilton-Byrne writes that the children were told Johnson was their godfather and that she remembers him "as a kindly old fellow with white hair who came to visit us sometimes" (*Unseen, Unheard, Unknown*, p. 102).

Queen's College regrets the direction that Raynor Johnson's life and thought took during his final two years at the College and in his remaining years when living at Ferny Creek. It strongly deplores his association with the sect known as "the Family" and particularly the fact that his association with the College gave a cloak of respectability to its activities. It condemns in the strongest possible terms the mistreatment to which the adopted children of Mrs Hamilton-Byrne were subjected and extends to them its most profound sympathy.