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STUDIES SECTION

Learned Academies—Why Bother?

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For seven years before the establishment of the Cultural and Communication Studies section of the Australian Academy of the Humanities I had, on the instigation of the late Professor Ken Ruthven, a close involvement in the various kinds of lobbying, both public and private, that ultimately led to the section's acceptance. It was hard, sometimes tedious work, and bemused peers and colleagues in the field would often ask, 'why bother?'. This question came from my generational peers in particular; in Cultural Studies the image of ourselves as radical outsiders and subversive insiders died hard. While my main aim in this short paper is to recognize and pay tribute in public memory to the pre-history of the Section and the work of some elders who made it possible, I would also like to suggest at least one reason for that lingering marginal romance.

Let me begin in the present with an article from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that I happened to come across on-line as I was preparing for this Symposium¹. Entitled 'UW-Stevens rolls out transformation that would cut 6 humanities degrees, focus on careers', the article contains much that is wearily familiar to Australian academics while offering some wryly amusing signs of the still intractable resistance of the American academy to changes we have long taken for granted. 'Restructuring is common in private sector', the writer solemnly informs her readers (we should be so lucky as to need that information), and 'still fresh is a controversial, quietly attempted and quickly abandoned political maneuver to edit the UW System's guiding mission by removing "search for truth" and replacing it with "meet the state's workforce needs"'. What I wish to emphasize, however, is not the relatively early take-up in Australia of higher education reforms that originated in Thatcher's Britain but rather the very slow if inexorable spread of those reforms, their temporal suspension in an endless present of permanent arrival, and the blank rhetorical reiteration that this enables.

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Fully thirty years have passed between the Dawkins ‘White Paper’ released in 1988 by the then Department of Employment, Education and Training in Australia and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens’ discovery that universities can do restructuring too. Alongside the unavoidable recognition of this slow unfolding of the same in policy rhetoric, it is important for appreciating the vision that created our Section also to remember how much of Australian intellectual life in 1988 differed from what we know today. My own story is an illustration. In that year I was in my late thirties. I did not have a PhD and, because I wanted to write essays, I had never had a full-time job. Instead I worked many part-time jobs, doing casual teaching and writing free-lance in an era when abundant, unrefereed journals and magazines paid for contributions and counted academics among their readers. I retired as film critic for the *Australian Financial Review* in 1985, and spent a few years lecturing around the U.S.A thanks to the interest that Patricia Mellencamp at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee had taken in my first book, *The Pirate’s Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (1988). In 1991-93, it was possible for someone like me to hold a Senior Fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for work towards my book, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (1998). This seems unimaginable now.

It was possible then, however, not only because of the structural openness of universities and arts organizations in those days to informal and uncredentialed initiatives but because the exceptional mentors that my generation had (Donald Horne in my case) were truly committed to nurturing new ideas wherever they saw them stirring. Because of the Vietnam War and the explosion of social movements in the 1970s, we baby-boomers were rambunctious and often obnoxious with our elders. In return we were helped and encouraged by some of those elders with courtesy, grace and an infinite tolerance for our rudeness. This reception was of course by no means universal, and one of the reasons for my own internalised ‘outsider’ sense in the 1980s and 1990s was the entrenched resistance of traditional literature departments to the ‘French theory’, the feminism, and the popular culture that interested me. This resistance was scarring. At the University of Sydney I was refused permission to write a PhD using French literary semiotics to study mid-twentieth century Australian socialist realism on the grounds that ‘you can’t have the same mark in two departments’. I grieved about this for years. Yet in the small society that Australia was in those days, the *exceptional* mentors were numerous, accessible, and their influence decisive.

Among those who produced the conditions in which a Cultural and Communication Studies section of the Australian Academy of the Humanities became imaginable were the distinguished literary critic Professor Ian Donaldson, Director of the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) at the Australian National University from 1974 to 1991 (then again in 2004-2007), and his colleague Professor Graeme Clarke, a classicist and archaeologist who also directed the HRC (1982-1999) and was a multiple office-bearer for the Academy of the Humanities between 1976 and 2014. These gentlemen formed a dynamic duo in Canberra. In concrete terms they made space over the decades for experimental and struggling projects to thrive. In 1986 they gave HRC support to a historic *Feminist Criticism and Cultural Production* conference, of which the proceedings were published as *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (Verso, 1988) edited by Susan Sheridan. I wrote my paper ‘Things To Do with Shopping Centres’ for this conference, and in my usual last minute frenzy to finish just at dawn on the very last day I locked myself out of my office. Professor Graeme Clarke smilingly turned up at six o’clock in the morning to let me in as I sat despondently, an unwashed waif in the corridor.

It was against this background that Ken Ruthven was able to persuade the Australian Academy of the Humanities to devote its 1991 Annual Symposium to scholarly areas that

were thriving outside its domain. Coming in the wake of that 1988 Dawkins White Paper, this Symposium (*Beyond the Disciplines—The New Humanities*, published in 1992) was only the first of several steps that proved necessary for the idea of a new Section to gain acceptance. Here is what I have written for an American context about this initial moment²:

Our brief was to explain our work persuasively to the eminent scholars of, broadly speaking, our grandparents' generation, among them the still legendary 'god professors' of another era in higher education, whom no one born after World War II might normally expect to meet; from the podium, the serried rows of venerable white men alternately listening to and sleeping through our disquisitions on everyday life and cultural difference lent the day a faintly surreal but inaugural air. I remember being unnerved to find that my zipper had come undone, and near dumbstruck that here were living men who had known Professor John Anderson, Challis Professor of Philosophy in the University of Sydney from 1927 to 1958, the scary chief deity (for a Sydney intellectual) amongst old-school god professors, and the author of one of the most influential essays in the history of Australian public and political culture, 'The Servile State' (1943)³—a defence of university autonomy and academic freedom against the 'utilitarian' reforming ambitions of the wartime Curtin federal Labor government (1941-45) as it tried to mobilize the universities more directly to serve the national interest and the needs of working people.

Among those 'living men' present were, for example, the philosopher John Passmore (1914-2004), who is remembered for his controversial contribution to environmental ethics, *Man's Responsibility for Nature* (1974); and the pioneering geographer of the Pacific, Oskar Spate (1911-2000), who directed the ANU's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies from 1967 to 1972. It was breath-taking to be speaking about Cultural Studies to such an audience. From the podium we really could see the old men falling asleep and their wives digging them in the ribs. Prof. Passmore asked me a long question I could not fully understand about whether women were taken more seriously before feminism, when I had actually spoken about the image of the 'ordinary man' in Australian culture while Judith Allen had done feminist critique⁴. However the great age and overwhelmingly masculine composition of the Academy at this time were among Ken Ruthven's chief reasons for pushing the idea of a new section capable of bringing in some 'youth' (that is, scholars aged 40-something rather than 80-something) with an activist bent and an ability to talk to the media in response to the challenging implications for the humanities of the Dawkins reform.

This symposium is now mythologised as the origin of our Section, but it did not suffice and the struggle did not end there. Not enough elders were persuaded and a media hysteria about philistines replacing Shakespeare with the study of Madonna (the singer) in universities was beginning to take off. So in 1994 I found myself explaining our field at another Academy Symposium, *Celebrating the Humanities*, organised by Prof. Deryck Schreuder. This was a Silver Jubilee occasion, with the proceedings published the following year as (in peak Paul Keating mode) *The Humanities and a Creative Nation*. To me, this volume is even more remarkable than the first, extraordinary this time for the participants as well as the audience to whom I offered my refutations of the idea that Cultural Studies is, if I remember rightly, a form of intellectual 'Paterson's Curse'⁵. Kate Lilley, the late Gary Simes and I were locked into a panel on The 'Canon' and its Critics (not a topic congenial for me but a sign of polemics to come) while the featured speakers included the composer Peter Sculthorpe on Music and the Humanities and

Noel Pearson on Mabo and the Humanities, with the magnificent art historian Prof. Joan Kerr, an elder in her own right, discussing Art and Life on a panel.

It was a privilege to be there and a high point for the 'old' humanities at their inclusive and generous best. The next step was more gruelling but in my view it was decisive in making a Cultural and Communication Studies section *plausible* for the Academy. This was the work done in 1996-97 by the Reference Group for the Australian Academy of the Humanities, in which I was invited to be a member. Sponsored by the Australian Research Council (ARC), this Reference Group was tasked with following up on the recommendations of a 1993 report, *Bridging the Gap*, by preparing a report on Australia's research capacity in the Humanities with a view to strengthening it for the future. We were now in early John Howard years, watching key institutions of multiculturalism, human rights and cultural policy inherited from the Hawke-Keating era melting down around us, and the need for creativity in pursuing a defensive mission while also proposing a credible constructive agenda shaped a mood of cross-disciplinary camaraderie that prevailed during our two years of work. The tone for this mood was set, however, by the kindness, tact and charm of the Chair of the Reference group, Professor Anthony Low AO (1927-2015). Simply meeting him was a genial culture shock for me. He was a huge person in every way. Former Vice Chancellor of ANU (1975-1982), and Smuts Professor of the History of the British Commonwealth, University of Cambridge (1983-1994), he had lived through violent upheavals of decolonization and could tell up-close stories of events that for me had been textbook items of History. He was welcoming to all, interested in what we had to say, and utterly free of partisan spirit as he crafted the report.

Volume 3 of the report, *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia—Into the 21st Century*, opens with an essay on Public Culture that I co-authored with Iain McCalman⁶. In this we made two key arguments: one, that public culture in Australia is historically best regarded as a 'mixed business', in which state-funded activities have often involved private sponsorship of various kinds; two, that once we examine *how* humanities research circulates it is soon evident that economic benefits are produced along the way. I'd wishfully like to think that these are now 'period' arguments, marked by the time and circumstances of their production in Howard's heyday. However, in that strange suspended temporality I mentioned at the outset, where the same discoveries about the role of humanities education and the need for reform are repeated over the decades with a sense of novelty, I saw the same arguments made on the ABC News website in October 2018, twenty years later, in response to then Minister Simon Birmingham's interference in the name of 'Australian taxpayers' with the ARC College of Experts' grants endorsements⁷. From this I draw the lesson that we are engaged in very long, protracted process of struggle over the role of the Humanities, even though participating in the Report taught me what an immense amount of labour goes into such policy-oriented enquiries for relatively ephemeral results.

I suspect that the repetitive nature of the disciplinary struggles of the 1980s and 1990s, that sense of endlessly banging against the same closed doors, helped quite as much as any social factors of gender, sexuality or ethnicity to install a sense of chronic marginality in the outlook of Cultural Studies practitioners in those years. I also believe, however, that having input to *Knowing Ourselves and Others* helped to 'normalise' our presence in the Academy as colleagues. However there was still one more push-back to deal with at the 28th Academy Symposium on *Our Cultural Heritage* in 1997, the year before our formal establishment. The issue in the air by then was 'cultural relativism' and since I myself am not a relativist my contribution was called Truth and Beauty in Our Times⁸. The signs of success were there: on a panel entitled 'Humanities Old and New', I was accompanied in the 'new' camp by Terry Threadgold and

Virginia Nightingale, while the ‘old’ was defended only by a spirited anti-relativist polemic by the University of Melbourne’s Tony Coady. Nevertheless, by this time I was bored and frustrated by so much reiteration and I ungraciously remarked in a ‘why bother?’ spirit myself that:

there is far more interest in the scandal of whether Cultural Studies does or does not have ‘clothes’ than there is in the substance of actual instances of Cultural Studies research. This is my third panel on the new humanities for an Academy Symposium. Between the first panel and this one, I have in fact spent most of my time as an ARC Senior Fellow on the life and the works of Ernestine Hill. I have never been asked to present that research at a gathering such as this.

This remains the case today. However, I did manage to sneak a bit of my other research preoccupation into *Our Cultural Heritage*:

My research fills my dreams with apocalyptic images, and there are times when I see our future in old kung fu pedagogy films. Picture this: twenty or thirty years from now, a handful of universities world-wide teach the disciplines of Arts and Humanities in the traditional, cumulative way. They are as hard to get into as Shaolin Temple: money and brilliance alone do not suffice to gain entry and supplicants linger at the gates in the rain, undergoing privations and enduring esoteric tests of aptitude in the hope that the Abbott will relent and let them in. Outside the walls are the badlands—Cultural Studies. The name survives, but the critical mission of the founders is as distant a memory as the ‘society’ they belonged to. Out here, students learn a little ethics, a little rhetoric, a lot of self-shaping; street-fighting skills to improve their chances of survival in a pitiless economy.

That moment from 1997 allows me to return to the recent article from the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* with which I began. Towards the end the president of the national Association of American Colleges and Universities, Lynn Pasquerella, is quoted as saying last year that ‘there is a concern ... that access to a liberal arts education will become only for the richest, while low-income students will be limited to vocational training’. Indeed, this is a concern. However, as the world turns and this long, slow, repetitive process of transformation to an unknown end rolls on, the enhanced role of the Australian Academy of the Humanities today in providing a strong voice for the Humanities in public media and to government agencies is immensely important and, as other speakers will attest, the Cultural and Communication Studies section has made a vital contribution to this. I am glad that we bothered. Above all, I am grateful to that earlier generation of scholars who opened the gates to let us in.

Notes

1. Karen Herzog, ‘UW-Stevens rolls out transformation that would cut 6 humanities degrees, focus on careers’. *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Nov. 12, 2018. <https://www.uwsp.edu/ucm/uNews/Pages/MJS-PFproposal18.aspx>
2. For a fuller account, see my ‘Humanities for Taxpayers: Some Problems’, *New Literary History* 36: 1 (Winter 2005), 111-129.
3. John Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962).
4. Meaghan Morris, ‘Cultural Studies’, and Judith A. Allen, ‘Feminist Critiques of Western Knowledges: Spatial Anxieties in a Provisional Phase?’, in K.K. Ruthven, ed., *Beyond the Disciplines: The New Humanities* (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1992), pp. 1-21 and pp. 57-77 respectively.
5. Meaghan Morris, ‘A Question of Cultural Studies’, in Deryck M. Schreuder, ed., *The Humanities and a Creative Nation: Jubilee Essays* (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1995), 137-159. Reprinted

in *Back to reality?: Social experience and cultural studies* ed. Angela McRobbie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 26-57.

6. Meaghan Morris and Iain McCalman, 'Public Culture', in *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia -- Into the 21st Century* Vol. 3 (Canberra: National Board of Employment, Education and Training, Australian Research Council, 1998), 1-20. Reprinted and revised as 'Public Culture' and Humanities Research in Australia: A Report', *Public Culture* 11.2 (Spring 1999), 319-345.

7. Joshua Specht, 'Minister, leave these grants alone: What Simon Birmingham doesn't understand about the public benefit of research', ABC Religion and Ethics, 31 October 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/simon-birmingham-and-the-public-benefit-of-research/10451142>

8. Meaghan Morris, 'Truth and Beauty in Our Times', in John Bigelow, ed., *Our Cultural Heritage* (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1998), 75-87.