

TRADITIONS: TYRANNY AND FREEDOM

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The text reproduced below was delivered as a talk on 5 December 1991 at the seventieth anniversary commemoration of the foundation of the McCaughey Chair of French in the University of Sydney. It was not printed at the time, perhaps because it said rude things about the then current manifestation of the Canberra bureaucracy from which universities continue to suffer. I make no apologies, however. The words have been left as they were thirteen years ago. It is enough to explain that 1991's incoming successor in the McCaughey line, Angus Martin, was leaving a personal Chair of French at Macquarie University.

We are all called upon to play inappropriate roles at one time or another. Several years ago I—a total abstainer—was asked to take the chair at the annual dinner of the Christopher Brennan Society. This evening, as someone who never saw, never heard G. G. Nicholson, I have the perilous honour of saying a few words about the first seventy years of the McCaughey Chair of French. To those of you whose experiences and memories go back further than mine I offer my apologies in advance.

What brings me here then? I am tempted to say: a fatal curiosity about the past. As a sort of *historien manqué* I began in my earliest years by interrogating elderly relatives about their lives in the middle of the nineteenth century. Since then I have moved to topics—mostly to do with printing and the book trade—that professional historians can find faintly respectable. In between I was spasmodically inquisitive about the background of the studies to which—in the terribly specialized structure that existed in New South Wales high schools in the late 1940s—I had in effect committed myself irrevocably at the age of fourteen. Apart from brief allusions in surveys of research on modern European languages in this country or in editorial musings in the *Australian Journal of French Studies*, the fruits of this passion lie in the M.A. thesis by Peggy Kerr that I supervised two decades ago. However, I would stress that for me this kind of reconstruction of obsolete pedagogies and evocation of long-departed personalities is not anecdote, gossip, antiquarianism—all those things that serious historians condemn with such rigour. We need to know where we belong, from what traditions we proceed. Without this awareness our present practices can seem to be, indeed are mere unreflecting routines.

What numerological superstition drives us to celebrate anniversaries and to pay tribute to our spiritual ancestors exclusively in certain years or on designated days? I sometimes reflect—rather cynically—that centenaries are the last refuge of journal editors in search of topics for special numbers. However,

in the shadow of Mozart's death two hundred years ago today, that thought is perhaps inopportune. What is certain is that I cannot produce for 5 December one of the great Revolutionary "days" or even—as I was able to do at a conference in July—the coincidence of the arrival in Port Jackson in 1791 of the "Mary Ann", bearing my great-great-great grandmother. Beyond noting the fact—learnt this week from a research essay of one of my students—that n° 10 of Ure Smith's *Art in Australia* commemorated late in 1921 the centenary of the end of the governorship of Macquarie, I have nothing piquant to add to an occasion that looks back over seven decades of idiosyncratic achievement and that heralds an imminent translation from North Ryde to Parramatta Road. Or should I say Grose's Farm?

As far as Nicholson's four successors are concerned, I feel on firmer ground. One of them was my teacher and later my first boss. Two of them were fellow-students. One was briefly the pupil of the absurdly young tutor that I was in 1955. With all of them I have shared at one time or another teaching and other professional responsibilities. Many people here could say the same or similar things, just as most of us are aware of the powerful presence—nearly half a century beyond the grave—of the first incumbent of the McCaughey Chair. Teachers of teachers and pupils of pupils—in these strong links are the explanations for the unique position of French studies in New South Wales in the twentieth century. Despite the elitism of earlier decades—if I may give that crude label to the choice of the fittest to which Nicholson proceeded relentlessly year by year—we are now a small army. Hence we must also consider, beyond the leaders, the rank and file to which almost all of us belong.

Institutional histories are good at telling us about those in charge—their files are in the archives—, but they are usually less effective in giving readers a sense of the impact of teachers on pupils. There is scope for a sophisticated oral history project on the whole Nicholsonian tradition, to which people have reacted in such diverse ways. What roles were played by schools and teachers as well as the University itself in creating what—for my generation at least—was a unique challenge: the Everest of the mastery of French that called the ablest matriculants—men and women—to climb it?

Men *and* women. I mention the subject not out of any particular devotion to political correctness, but because it is notably troubling in our own field. In times past we could point—a little complacently—to the pioneering advances achieved by Gladys Marks. But have we recognized, fostered and rewarded the enormous talent of those who have for decades now been in the majority in our classes? There is no simple answer, and we cannot blind ourselves to the fact that most students of both genders leave our preoccupations behind when they have taken their last examination or submitted their last essay.

What influence do we have on the intellectual disposition of our pupils? Chemists—witness the centenary volume produced for this University's Faculty of Science in 1985—like to think of their “pedigrees” or “lineages” and to set themselves in a chain of names leading back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We do this less, and indeed would have some difficulty in situating Nicholson in a way that speaks unequivocally of networks, patronage and discipleship. Mungo MacCallum, to be sure, and the sustaining local context. Gaston Paris, who is mentioned with approval in the etymological volumes? Yet GGN had at least one passage at arms with Mario Roques, Paris's successor at the Collège de France, and his own pupils took largely to comparative literature. In a more general way we can place Nicholson in that tradition of German philology that marked Sydney so strongly before 1914, and the University of Melbourne hardly at all. I have been threatening for some time to write a study of “Sydney and the German Connexion”. In the meantime I reassure my Monash students that they are in the right place, because the University of Melbourne, which has never subscribed to the *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, is manifestly an institution with no pretensions to serious scholarship.

Scholarship? Pedantry perhaps? The accusation is and was easily made against the Sydney French school. However, we know that French at Sydney has encompassed many things, right back to Pierre-Ambroise Dutruc and his “new and original plan” of grammatical instruction. (I have this afternoon made what should become a ritual visit to Dutruc Street in Randwick and observed—with slight apprehension—that it is the address of Macquarie Pathology Services.) Even if it is quite artificial and misleading to set up a polar opposition between Nicholson and his collaborator Brennan, it is obvious that our tradition is not a monolithic one. Within a framework of precision and in accordance with—to quote Nicholson—“that habit of accurate observation which is the key to all intellectual progress”, a great deal of variety is possible.

Incidentally in the special number of the *Australian Journal of French Studies* in memory of Ron Jackson, I paid tribute to “the liberality with which [Ian] Henning, despite firm convictions about the way languages should be taught, allowed members of his department to develop their own interests and approaches”. It was not just nostalgia for old bosses that led me to that statement of indebtedness. The many different things done by people within or emerging from the Sydney Department of French illustrate the fact that what seemed a tyranny was also a liberation. Perhaps, quite simply, because we had been given “the key to all intellectual progress”. In the end there is no paradox at all.

At a time when one can wonder whether traditional scholarship will have to look for survival *outside* universities, the unbending position of Nicholson—so marvellously expressed in the extracts chosen for the commemorative booklet distributed today—is a tremendous comfort and inspiration. Who now would dare chide “management” as he did repeatedly? If we hold to the essentials of that faith—not its occasional petty details—we shall preserve the capacity of universities to promote the “desire of knowledge” that, as Housman said in his great inaugural lecture of 1892, is an essential human attribute. And, as one could add, a desire that will not be extinguished by the cant of DEET. To Nicholson and to his successors we owe thanks for bearing witness against the snares and delusions of the 1990s.

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