Learningguild Letter

1.2006

Dear members and friends of Learningguild,

Political philosophy, political history, political economics, and political advocacy need to be distinguished, and all deserve plenty of attention. Learningguild is an educational and social, not a political, movement, but we ought to be more concerned with politics than most of us (including me) have been, especially because of our educational and social concerns. To the views I express in this letter I commit no one but myself, and certainly do not claim to speak for Learningguild; I should be very glad to receive comments engaging with mine whatever views they express and to publish whatever furthers discussion.

In this case it is advisable to declare the standpoint from which I write, a small-l liberal one illustrated by the fact that I voted for John Howard in 1996, but have voted Labor since then. The main reason for my 1996 vote was that I had a great dislike of Paul Keating's abusive behaviour in the House of Representatives; I had also heard that he was disinclined to learn from colleagues who dissented from him.

In this letter I am reviewing two very different books concerned with John Howard and the years in which he has been Prime Minister of Australia. Each of these books may be borrowed from the Learningguild Library. The earlier, which appeared in 2004 and is opposed to the policies of the Coalition government, is *The Howard Years*, edited by Robert Manne and published by Black Inc. Agenda, Melbourne. The later is *The Howard Factor*, edited by Nick Cater: it has been published this year, "in association with THE AUSTRALIAN", by Melbourne University Press, and all the essayists in it are employed by that newspaper. I found only one reference in it to *The Howard Years*, and there the writer merely agreed with a passage he quoted about Howard's prominence in the 80s as an advocate of free-market reform. How well the absence in each book of careful discussion of other views illustrates the shortage of such discussion in the Australian media (including the ABC) and in Australian life in general. Wherever there is such a shortage, exaggeration is likely to prevail at the expense of truth and fairness. Christopher Pearson, for example, writes this sentence in the new book (p.26), quoting someone like himself:

> One consequence of non-interventionism — in the federal government's allowing the humanities and social sciences in Australian universities to be all but overrun by its ideological enemies — is, as Keith Windschuttle puts it, 'to end up with a couple of dozen publicly funded, left-wing think tanks'.

Although this book is not entirely uncritical, it is much more concerned to explain Howard's electoral success than to evaluate his attitudes and his government's policies. It does much to explain that success, especially in the essay by Steve Lewis:

> … Labor has been outflanked by Howard who has combined conviction politics with a skilful pragmatism the likes of which Australia has rarely, if ever, seen. Crucially, Howard has seized the economic agenda and Labor has struggled to respond.
>
> Howard has mastered, better than any other political figure since Robert Menzies, the art of reflecting the values and aspirations of suburban Australia.
>
> (pp. 184, 190)

The cartoonist Bill Leak is not an admirer, but he too notes Howard's skilful pragmatism in retaining political power:

> He … proves time and time again that his ability to read the collective mood of the people is pretty near infallible, as is his skill at leading his party and bending his ministers to his will. …. Howard has reshaped Australia to conform to his own vision. … we don't seem to care about all the things he has taken away.
>
> (p.199f)

We all like to be "relaxed and comfortable", to use the words of Howard's expressed wish for Australians, when there is no need at all to be anything else. (That is part of the attraction of Epicurus's ideal of *ataraxia* or serenity, which will be one of the contrasting ideals before us in next year's Learningguild philosophy seminar, concerned with Cicero.) Similarly, the "values and aspirations" which most groups of Australians will be quickest to agree on for themselves and their families will be economic ones. But it by no means follows that they are the only values and aspirations they will recognize or at least respect, especially if other less self-regarding ones are put before them reasonably and vividly. There is an urgent need for more overseas aid, for more dentists, for more police and medical workers among Indigenous citizens, and for much more extensive and initially costly action concerning climate change; but Howard does not offer us the possibility of aspiring to rise to challenges of such kinds. Instead, as Paul Kelly astutely writes in the first essay (p.10),

> The ideas that shape Howard's governance are economic liberalism, social conservatism, cultural traditionalism, national security, family support and national pride.

That word 'liberalism' will serve as a hinge on which this letter can turn to the limitations of Howard's success in retaining government and indeed the main reason why there is, as things stand at the beginning of November 2006, a good chance that, as I am bound to say that I hope, Labor's Kim Beazley will replace him as Prime Minister.

'Liberal' and 'liberalism' are **contested** words: that is to say, people differ about what they should at best mean. You cannot appropriately call yourself a liberal unless you value liberty and freedom ('liberty' is the more political word, 'freedom' has the wider range), but that still leaves plenty of room for disagreement about what should be done in their name. This is an old story, but few people now know the public lecture in which, in my view, that disagreement was best discussed. In Leicester, England, in 1881, T.H.Green took the theme "Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract" (the lecture is in *Works*, Vol. III, and my summary and analysis of it is available on request). In his first paragraph he noted the objection that had been put to the Employers' Liability Act which Gladstone's new Liberal administration had introduced:

> 'The workman', it was argued, 'should be left to take care of himself by the terms of his agreement with the employer.'

That remains the basic view of free-market liberalism, underlying the Howard government's Industrial Relations legislation. 125 years after Green's lecture, we may well be willing to agree that union dominance of working conditions, where it has occurred, has allowed too little flexibility and has protected the lazy and the incompetent. In particular, a basic wage must not be set at a height which will discourage employers from taking on new people, nor must it be unreasonably difficult to bring an employee's tenure to an end for good and declared reason and after written and constructive warning concerning the difference in performance required. But Green was right to insist that freedom in the fullest sense of the word was not limited to freedom of contract and could properly limit it:

> Our modern legislation … with reference to labour, and education, and health, involving as it does manifold interference with freedom of contract, is justified on the ground that it is the business of the state … to maintain the conditions without which a free exercise of the human faculties is impossible.
>
> (p.374)

Reasonable security of employment (i.e., freedom from well-grounded fear of arbitrary treatment) is basic to that free exercise for those who are employed. In *The Howard Factor*, Brad Norington comments on Howard's move to abolish unfair dismissal claims for businesses employing up to 100 people (rather than just up to 20).

> This was a politically deft move that gave the whipping hand to employers. It meant that not only small businesses but medium to large firms were much freer to hire and fire. Most workers were theoretically on notice all the time.
>
> (p.101)

Unsurprisingly, he says in conclusion, two pages later, concerning Howard's industrial reforms, "The effect on productivity remains unclear."

It seems likely that the desire for a fair go in employment for oneself and one's fellows will dispose a large number of otherwise undecided voters to vote for Beazley and Labor, unless there are strong countervailing factors.

The narrowing of the mood and policies of the Liberal party under Howard (which has led to the alienation from it of such notable Liberals as the former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and the late Dick Hamer, formerly Premier of Victoria) has meant already that in the States, of which there is none that has a Liberal government,

the party lacks attractiveness to a wide range of able potential candidates and to the public generally. How telling it is that it has taken a small group of courageous dissidents such as Petro Georgiou to prevent the federal government from maintaining some of the harsher components of the treatment of asylum-seekers or bringing in new ones. That such prevention is possible is one chief glory of parliamentary democracy.

In a thorough chapter "Refugees", William Maley concludes (p.163):

> The practices and policies of the Howard government towards refugees constitute a shocking indictment of its liberal credentials. …. It has actually betrayed the cause of freedom, by treating the victims of oppressive regimes with moral cruelty. That these policies may enjoy popular support does nothing to vindicate them from an ethical perspective.

I particularly recommend that chapter, but almost the whole book deserves close study for the detailed support it gives to an unfavourable evaluation of Howard and his government. Moreover, by contrast with the later book, this one has a bibliography with each chapter. Robert Manne gives a valuable overview, and, though when he wrote these sentences (p.49) in 2004 he noted that "no political difficulty" had been experienced in the matter by the government, that may not be true at the next election:

> Under Howard, Australia had been involved in an unprovoked invasion of Iraq, without a UN mandate, to disarm the country of weapons it did not possess. Following the invasion Iraq descended into an indescribable chaos, from which it seemed highly unlikely to emerge.

The later book makes much of Howard's stance of representing what he called after the Cronulla riot in December 2005 "the overwhelming majority of Australians". Judith Brett, in the earlier one, writes of his "disregard for informed public opinion" (p.91); it would be more accurate to say "disregard for well-informed and wise dissenters". Concerning policy towards Indigenous citizens, we may indeed want to say that Noel Pearson is right to insist that handout welfare in injurious to them, and we may add that competent administrators of funds, and sufficient educated and humane police, are everywhere needed, even if they are non-Indigenous and working alongside Indigenous people, and that English must be taught efficiently everywhere in Australia. Nevertheless Mick Dodson is justified, in a moving chapter, to contrast on p.129f the emphasis of Sir William Deane on the need to give full recognition to "a shameful aspect of our history" with Howard's remark "I sympathise fundamentally with Australians who are insulted when they are told that we have a racist, bigoted past."

Simon Marginson has a very informative chapter on the Howard government's policies on higher education. A major conclusion is that "it leads to the complacency of the elite and the mediocrity of the mass, and it widens the social division between them" (p.240). How important it is for Learningguild to maintain its emphasis both on the centrality of reasoning and expression, each of which is widely neglected, and on the careful and critical use of the best possible books (including textbooks) and related materials, made available, with guidance, to anyone, whatever his or her financial position, whose level and interests they fit and who is willing to use them well.

Yours,

John Howes

James K. Baxter: the Man and his Poetry

This article by **NIGEL WATSON** *is based on a talk he gave to our Friday-evening group on March 3rd. Professor Watson grew up in New Zealand and studied at Otago, Cambridge, Princeton and Göttingen, and was from 1965 to 1993 Professor of New Testament at Ormond College, in the Presbyterian and then the Uniting Church Theological Hall.*

James K. Baxter is widely regarded as New Zealand's finest poet, but he was also a colourful and controversial person who evoked in others a wide range of reactions, from hero-worship to intense distaste. In the story of his life two themes recur: his ambivalence towards universities and his antipathy towards respectable, middle-class society. After a turbulent youth marked by excessive drinking and a series of starts and stops at several university centres, he eventually got his B.A. and worked for a time in the schools publication arm of the Department of Education. A number of delightfully whimsical poems for children date from that time. Here is part of a poem entitled "The Elephant":

> The elephant is huge and round
> And when he walks he shakes the ground,
> And when he snorts it makes you wonder
> And look into the sky for thunder ….
> Isn't it queer a beast so big ─
> He could wear a haystack as a wig
> And wear a train shed for a house ─
> Is frightened of a tiny mouse?

All through this time, he was publishing poetry and rapidly making a name for himself. His first slim volume of poems was published in 1944, when he was only eighteen. He was also a guest lecturer at various university colleges in New Zealand. Yet he remained suspicious of the university world, obstinately outside academia.

To quote from his "Essay on the Higher Learning":

> Along with a genuine admiration for the character-shaping power of our institutions of Higher Learning ─ some of the toughest psychotics in the country inhabit those walls ─ I feel that they have had little effect, except a negative one, upon the processes that make me tick as a writer. ... Writing, in my case, has proceeded entirely from Lower Learning, learning who one is. And this is not learnt in a lecture-room or library, but in the jails and torture rooms of a private destiny, or conceivably planting potatoes, or conceivably kneeling blindly at the Mass.

One of his poems is entitled "To Any Young Man who Hears my Verses Read in a Lecture Room". It begins like this:

> When some cheese-headed ladder-climber reads
> A poem of mine from the rostrum,
> Don't listen ....

In 1958, Baxter became a Roman Catholic. There can be no question of the sincerity of his conversion or of the increasing importance to him of his religious faith as he grew older, but his fellow-churchmen and churchwomen sometimes found him an embarrassment.

At the end of 1968, a decisive event occurred. He had a dream in which he heard the call "Go to Jerusalem!" He understood that as a call to go to a small settlement of that name on the Wanganui River and set up a community. One reason why he was drawn to this site was that there was a small Maori settlement there, as well as a Catholic church and convent, a convent of the Sisters of Compassion. An earlier leader of this convent, Suzanne Aubert, is remembered as a woman of great energy and compassion.

By now, Baxter was convinced of an affinity between the deepest traditions of the church and the communal life of Maori people. In Jerusalem, both Maori and pakeha would try to live without money or books, work on the land and deepen their spirituality. Faithful to that conviction, he left Dunedin with only a change of clothes and a Bible in Maori. His wife, who was part-Maori herself and had sensed his growing restlessness, sent him on his way with her blessing. Though they lived apart from then on, they were not estranged, and some of his most moving poems are addressed to her.

Before taking up residence in Jerusalem in 1969, he engaged in social work in Wellington and Auckland among drug-addicts, alcoholics, the homeless and the unemployed. He felt that he was steadily dying in the comfort of his home, smoking cigars and watching television, while there was a great need for some of the people who were being pulled to pieces in the towns to have a sanctuary. Jerusalem was to become that sanctuary. Soon drop-outs and misfits started turning up at Jerusalem, and Baxter extended towards them more than a merely token concern, even though he may not have known, at any one time, how many people were in the house. Here is a quotation from one of his letters from Jerusalem:

> The griefs of the tribe have communicated themselves to me – six of them had their difficulties to be resolved before and after midnight, and when I embraced them, I think, as often happens, their tensions flowed into me as electricity flows into the wire that conducts it to the ground.

There is more to be said, however, about the Jerusalem venture. In 2002, a whole series of events took place in New Zealand to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Baxter's death. A play about his life entitled *Jerusalem, Jerusalem* was performed, to considerable critical acclaim. The author, Mike Riddell, adopts a device used by T.S.Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral* and has a series of accusers charge Baxter with being a charlatan. More than once the charge is levelled against him that he took advantage of some of the vulnerable women who turned up at Jerusalem and fathered a child. The Baxter of the play does not refute the charge. It also seems clear that the Jerusalem commune was never put on a satisfactory financial footing and that the haphazard meals exacerbated the sickness which brought about Baxter's early death. The commune folded a few months later.

Nevertheless, something else that became clear through the celebrations that marked the thirtieth anniversary of his death was that many, many people still remember him with great affection. Among them are the Sisters of Compassion who still live at Jerusalem and his widow Jacquie.

Part of the point of the Jerusalem venture was to offer a prophetic critique of the oppressive nature of pakeha middle-class society. In a poem written at this time, "Letter to Sam Hunt", Baxter stated his conviction that

> Poets live
> By a refusal to forgive
> The mighty Bog of social shit
> That has no use for sex or wit
> Or art or hope, but simply is
> Internally its own abyss.

In a later interview, he restated the convictions that led him to go to Jerusalem and said "I have become a Christian guru, a barefooted and bearded eccentric, a bad smell in the noses of many good citizens."

When Baxter died in 1972, at the age of forty-six, he left behind a body of poetry remarkable in its range and achievement. The volume of his collected poems has 661 titles. In addition, there is a substantial volume of plays and some significant literary criticism.

To begin with, something about his understanding of poetry. In a book that he wrote about modern poetry, *The Fire and the Anvil*, Baxter offers to the reader a sonnet of his own composition, about Mt Egmont, the mountain that dominates the province of Taranaki. Here are the first eight lines, after which there are six that are full of allusions to Maori mythology.

> O giant! in thy coronet of snows
> And hanging woods about for mantle green,
> Clear-sounding cataract and dark ravine
> Where night and day the turbulent torrent flows –
> Cloud-piercing sentinel! Thy forehead knows
> Both tempest-bearing cloud and sky serene;
> And fair farmlands surround thy wild demesne
> Where now the bright December harvest grows …

On their first reading of this sonnet, most readers are probably quite impressed. But then they discover that Baxter himself is not. He had set out to write a mock poem, a bad poem, and this sonnet was the result. He took the first idea that came into his head and then built up the poem line by line, letting words generate ideas, which generated words. The resultant sonnet about Mt Egmont is not, in his judgement, an authentic poem at all but a piece of inflated trash.

For one thing, the poem is full of hackneyed sentiments: "cloud-piercing sentinel", "thy snows a symbol of eternity"; as well as of conventional epithets, as in "dark ravine", "turbulent torrent", "fair farmlands". This inevitably makes for imprecision, for fuzziness. There is no phrase that etches the scene indelibly on the reader's mind. There is nothing of the particularity of the present moment. The result is what Baxter calls "a pseudo-statement". He goes on:

> The statement embodied in the true poem refers to a real occasion of illumination, it is the mirror of a spiritual event. In a pseudo-statement the true labour of composition has not occurred; there is no spiritual event in which the reader can participate.
>
> (p. 39)

And yet, Baxter adds, the most horrifying feature of such inflated trash is that it can often deceive the eye of a practised critic. The evocative force of the English language, in the hands of a writer accustomed to the use of assonance and alliteration, is enough to create an impression of depth, even though he has added no significance to that with which the language has presented him (p.37f).

Many of Baxter's own poems, particularly the poems from his later years, are deceptively simple, yet quite unforgettable. Here is part of a poem which he addressed to his wife. It has the simplicity of conversational speech.

> Those we knew when we were young,
> None of them have stayed together,
> All their marriages battered down like trees
> By the winds of a terrible century.
>
> I was a gloomy drunk.
> You were a troubled woman.
> Nobody would have given tuppence for our chances,
> Yet our love did not turn to hate.
>
> If you could fly this way, my bird,
> One day before we both die,
> I think you might find a branch to rest on.

What shall we call James K. Baxter? Poet, prophet, guru, Christ figure, comic, drop-out, alcoholic? Maybe we should say "All of the above". But I want to end on a more positive note. His last book, *Autumn Testament*, was published after his death. A close friend, Frank McKay, contributed the Foreword. He begins by quoting the announcement of Baxter's death that appeared on the billboard of *The Dominion* on 24th October, 1972:

> James K. Baxter, 1926-1972, Friend.

He goes on:

> I write in the first days of James K. Baxter's death when I have seen so many who loved him suffering together the agony of his dying. But already the agony gives way to peace. Who can write without diffidence about this man, possessed by everyone and yet beyond possession — by any faith, any family, any friend? James K. Baxter towers in our literature and history like a great tree, and the birds of the air found shelter in its branches.

A Book about Wives

MARGARET HOWES, *a wife for 47 years (and the coordinator of Support for Asylum Seekers at Hearings, and Learningguild's Subscriptions Secretary), reviews Margaret Forster's* **Good Wives?** *(Vintage, London 2002).*

The subtitle is *Mary, Fanny, Jennie and me 1845-2001*. Having written about these four wives, Margaret Forster ends her Prologue with "The question still is: what *is* a wife? Who is 'good'?" The question of wifely obedience was raised for her at the age of eleven, in 1949, when as a bridesmaid she was horrified to discover that in the marriage service the wife had to promise to obey the husband but not *vice versa*. The women whose marriages she has chosen to study provide examples of how our views on marriage and the role of a wife have changed, but probably not to the extent that the author would wish. The book is well structured: there is a prologue on the author's path to marriage, and a detailed account of the lives of each of the other three wives, in each case followed by "Reflections" in which comparisons are made with the author's own marriage and modern ideas brought in. Included also are the relationships that the wives make or endure with their in-laws. In an Epilogue the author's conclusion is that "even if it comes to appeal only to a minority, marriage, in its new and freer form, will endure. I think many women will still be happy to be wives after an apprenticeship as partners."

The first wife to be discussed is Mary Livingstone (1821-62), married to the explorer and missionary David Livingstone, whose work took him to remote parts of the Transvaal, now incorporated into modern South Africa. Daughter of the missionary Robert Moffat, Mary was well equipped to be the wife of such a man, except that she hated being left with the children in a native village, the only white woman for miles with no way to make contact with other Europeans should an emergency arise. Her life was hard, in a hostile environment of dust, flies and little water. Yet she was quite content to obey her husband and is seen as an example of an extremely submissive wife (p.317).

David's parents lived in Scotland and his father was an extremely strict, authoritarian, evangelical Christian. At one stage in her marriage David sent Mary and her four children to Scotland to live with his parents, so that the children could be educated there. After four days she left the Livingstones' home and had practically nothing to do with her in-laws, until she and David, again united, left all their children in his mother's and sister's care (his father had died) while he returned to Africa for more exploring, supported by her.

Fanny Stevenson (1840-1914), married to Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island* and other novels, is the second wife. She was born in America and lived at a time when wives were not necessarily expected to be as obedient to their husband's wishes as Mary Livingstone. She had led a quite bohemian life, leaving her American husband who continued to have affairs, and going to live in Paris and then at Grez, a small village nearby which was frequented by artists in the summer. Fanny considered herself both a writer and an artist. In Grez she met Robert Louis Stevenson. Eventually they married and, for the sake of his health, sailed to the South

Pacific and eventually settled at Vailima in Samoa where they built a house. Fanny starts out as a much more independent wife than Mary, but as her husband's health demands continual attention she gives up her artistic pursuits to devote herself not only to looking after him, but to designing and supervising the building of a house and garden. Her relations with Louis's parents were excellent: she wanted them to like her so set about ensuring that they would.

The third wife is Jennie Lee (1904-88), whose husband was the prominent Labour politician Aneurin Bevan. Jenny was a Labour politician in her own right. Both she and Aneurin were passionate socialists and members of parliament. Jenny was no believer in marriage and married Aneurin only because both realised that their parliamentary careers would be irrevocably damaged if they simply lived together. She was no orthodox wife. She refused to have children and undertake the normal housewifely tasks; in fact she arranged for her parents to live with them in London so that her mother could run the house. She did nothing to become friendly with Aneurin's family, and they were quite contemptuous of her for not being what they considered a "proper wife". Nevertheless, as his career progressed, and he became Minister of Health with the responsibility of ensuring the passing of the bill that would set up the National Health Scheme and so provide free medical care for all, Jenny found that her career could not progress as she would have wished.

In the first place if she was given promotion it would be said that she got it because she was Aneurin's wife, not because she deserved it. Secondly the pressure of work and the effort required to promote the health legislation to which they were both passionately committed meant that she had to spend more of her time and effort in supporting and protecting Aneurin. It was not until he died of cancer in 1960 and Labour was returned to power that Jenny was able to accept a ministerial position and undertake new responsibilities with enthusiasm. Only then could it be seen how much she had been held back by deciding to devote so much time and energy to the support of her husband.

Through these three studies, and with reference to her own experience, the author traces in the Epilogue the changes in the public expectations of a wife, from being submissive, obedient and supportive, through to being a partner, though she does admit that such a role requires concessions to be made for the sake of an harmonious relationship.

To those who wish to think about what marriage may require and what it may make possible, and particularly about being a wife, this book is to be commended although there are times when one wishes for less detail. Some comment could have been made on the way in which men are sometimes adopting the supportive role traditionally associated with a wife. Then there are wives such as the leader of the democratic movement in Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi, who have left their families on the other side of the world in order to support the cause of freedom in their home country. Perhaps the subject of another book?

Beginning Medicine at Bond University

JIMMY JIANG *has left his parents' home in Melbourne this year to study Medicine at Bond University on Queensland's Gold Coast, and here he tells us about the course and his early experience of being a student there and of looking after himself. He is the son of Learningguild members Guang-chi Jiang and Feng-ying, who between them have long experience in medical and pharmaceutical research, and came to Australia from China after experiencing the hardships of the Cultural Revolution. Jimmy's secondary school was University High, and while in Year 11, as a member of Learningguild, he developed his English by our "Words and Sentences" method, writing sentences of his own to accompany ones he found which illustrated the use of words he wanted to master.*

For as long as I can remember, the health science field has entranced me. I have been influenced by my parents, both of whom are professionals in it, but in no way have they "made" me study, or "forced" me to go into medicine, as is commonly supposed in regard to Asian families in Australia. I am grateful for what I have learnt of their experience and for their fostering of my enthusiasm.

Medicine is an ever-growing field: the advances over the last century in the understanding, treatment and prevention of disease and ill-health have been immense. As well as Western medicine, there is traditional Chinese medicine, and other alternative forms, all of which can be combined with Western medicine for synergistic benefits. This has greatly attracted me, along with the prospect of working along with many other health professionals in a big hospital.

Bond University's medical program has a very different structure from that of other universities. It has fifteen semesters, over about four-and-a-half years, by contrast with Melbourne's twelve semesters in six years. Each trimester runs for about fourteen weeks.

I had not wanted to go to university straight after leaving school and so it suited me well that Medicine at Bond would begin in May, not March. I changed from part-time to full-time at McDonald's and also managed the catering at the lawn bowls in the Commonwealth Games.

I was fortunate to have my mother and sister come up with me to the Gold Coast. After they left, life became very different for me. Cooking, cleaning, shopping, washing, paying rent and the whole lot of things that can suck the energy out of you when starting to live by yourself started to weigh on me. Mealtimes had changed from a one-process event, eating, to the three processes of preparing, eating and cleaning.

As a student, however, I seemed to have developed a sudden thirst for knowledge, perhaps because of the nature of tertiary education, with its emphasis on self-directed learning, and the fact that I was living by myself without a television set. I learn more at university than I did at school, where my focus was on what I had to know for the exams, partly because I do not know for sure what will be assessed and therefore try to cover everything, and partly because I often stumble upon other

interesting connected things when I do that extra bit of reading. For example, when learning about the cardiovascular system, and how the blood is oxygenated at the lungs and then distributed by the heart, I suddenly became very interested in the physiology of the lungs and the whole respiratory system.

To my surprise, novels became my source of entertainment, and instead of listening to FM radio I changed to AM because I actually wanted to listen to the news. Four weeks before the end-of-semester exam I was shocked to find how much work was left to do and how little time remained. Housework had become more manageable, but I fell ill and was also homesick.

My classmates are a diverse group: there are people from the Australian States and a few from Canada, New Zealand and Taiwan. The age-range is from seventeen to the early fifties. There are not only school-leavers but graduates who have worked as a nurse, paramedic, pharmacist, researcher, teacher or lawyer. The diversity of a medical cohort at Bond is unique. A lot can be learnt from people who have worked in different professions and have different experiences which are shared around. There are only about 80 students in the cohort, so they are likely to be closer to one another than their contemporaries are elsewhere and to become friends with the staff.

I have joined many university clubs: my favourite is the Salsa dance club. I hope the French club will be more active next trimester, as I miss learning and speaking French.

Back in Melbourne for a vacation, I've realized what privileges my home has given me, and that I have so long taken them for granted.

WHAT'S A GOOD INTRODUCTION TO …

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION?

DR MAX STEPHENS, *a member of Learningguild, conducts research in mathematics education at the University of Melbourne and teaches prospective teachers at the Australian Catholic University (in East Melbourne). Max took a Master's degree in philosophy at Melbourne, and his doctorate in mathematics education at Madison, Wisconsin. He has frequently visited Japan, and wrote about a recent visit in* Lg L *2.2004.*

The book I am considering here is actually called *An Introduction to Philosophy of Education*. Written by Robin Barrow and Ronald Woods, it was first published in 1975 and is now in its third edition (Routledge Falmer 2001). It aims to introduce readers to a "rigorous investigation" of some concepts of education. There are two new chapters written by Barrow following the retirement of Woods, one called "Curriculum Theory" and another "Research in Teaching". These are added to the previous ten chapters which have headings including "Knowledge and the Curriculum", "Rationality", and "Theory into Practice".

To quote from the preface to the third edition, "[the book] is concerned with trying to explicate and unfold ideas or concepts, such as those of education, creativity and culture. The object is to explore and iron out obscurities, contradictions, confusions, absurdities, and so forth that may be involved in particular people's hazy grasp of the ideas in question, rather than say how various words should be used" (p.xvi). The aim is to show philosophy in action. The authors note with regret the decline of interest in philosophy of education in universities and other institutes that prepare teachers. It is, however, important to ask whether this decline of interest in philosophy of education may be attributed in part to the way in which it has been conducted.

The new chapter by Barrow on research in teaching is disappointing and betrays a limited understanding of empirical research. Attention is rightly given to the need for conceptual clarity in educational research, and researchers are cautioned about extending their findings beyond what they might be entitled to claim, especially given the particularities and constraints in which such research is carried out. But one has to ask whether the author really understands the relationship between research in teaching and what teachers do when he speculates, admittedly tongue in cheek, what a school might be like if it took seriously the results of research in teaching:

> It would consist of teachers adopting a number of specific techniques and tactics, behaviour and organizational ploys, routines and rules. They would proceed to a considerable extent formulaically rather than by intelligent responses to situations. What particular techniques teachers selected would be largely a matter of chance.
>
> (p.181)

Recent research, for example, in the teaching of early reading seems to support the overall efficacy of a phonics-based approach, especially for students who may be experiencing difficulty in reading text. But advocates of a whole-language approach can also point to research findings which support the importance of that approach in elucidating meaning. Teachers who know the research have to make an intelligent response using a combination of approaches best suited to the needs of their pupils. They may opt to use one approach more strongly with particular pupils. Knowing the research does not provide teachers with a formula. Good research should inform choice. In some respects, this chapter does not sit well with the remainder of the book.

The opening chapter of the book, entitled "The Concept of Education", is one of the clearest in exemplifying the book's objectives. There the authors lay the foundations for several themes that run through the remainder of it. They examine the claim of R. S. Peters that the term 'education' implies that worthwhile things are or have been transmitted. The authors show that this claim is not strictly correct since one can say without self-contradiction "A's education was a waste of time" or "The only education that B received was in how to be dishonest." Peters was wrong to believe that the content of education must consist of things considered to be worthwhile. The authors then look at the term 'educational', taking this term to refer to how something is learned as distinct from what is learned, and conclude that for a process to be considered educational it must be morally acceptable. They add, however, that this line of argument is unrewarding because it shows only what is

disqualified; for example, those processes which use fear or threats of torture or indoctrination to teach people cannot be called educational.

The rest of the opening chapter looks at Peters's conception of "an educated person". (His actual expression 'an educated man' is avoided today.) The authors note that the term 'an educated person' is usually one of commendation. They go on to look at Peters's claim that there are criteria for calling someone an educated person. Among them is that an educated person must have a breadth of knowledge (Peters uses the term 'cognitive perspective') such that "we" should refuse to call a highly-trained scientist an educated person if he or she failed to see various connections between science and other areas such as history or current affairs. The authors are correct in pointing out that Peters's use of 'we' reflects **his** preferences on who is to be regarded as educated. Other people might be quite at ease in calling a highly-trained scientist educated, while drawing attention to certain limitations of his or her education. There is no logical requirement to support Peters's position. What the authors do claim is that in asserting that someone is educated one is logically committed to saying that the person in question has been transformed or changed over time as a result of some discernible process of acquiring knowledge (and, I would add, certain habits as well). For example, children don't need to be educated to talk or to walk, but they do need to be educated to speak grammatically correct English. The first chapter concludes with the claim that more appears to be required for becoming educated than the acquisition of numerous bits of information. In the authors' view, the idea of transformation implicit in the concept of an educated person seems to involve reference to both knowledge and understanding.

Subsequent chapters explore questions such as "Are there different kinds of knowledge to be promoted?" and "What is it to understand?" In a later chapter on indoctrination the question of acceptable methods of education is taken up again. The authors note that although the topic of indoctrination seems to have declined in popularity among philosophers of education, it has once again become relevant with the rise of religious fundamentalism and the recurrence of creationist legislation in America. They don't elaborate on either of these, but select a strange example to present what they claim to be "a paradigm case" of indoctrination. They paint a picture of a Catholic school (hardly recognisable today) where the teachers, supported by parents, are determined to try to bring up pupils as devout Catholics believing unquestioningly in whatever the Catholic Church teaches. The authors point to three features of such a school if it is to be said to indoctrinate. The first is the specific content of what is being taught, namely a set of unprovable beliefs ranging from belief in a God through to what might be called specific church teachings. A second feature is that the teaching is intended to cause pupils to have an unshakable belief in these propositions. A third is that the methods used to inculcate these beliefs are non-rational, based, for example, on fear of punishment, or relying on deliberate distortions of opponents' beliefs. Whatever one may think about the specific example used by the authors to make their case, it runs the risk of being a "straw man". Two questions remain unanswered. The first relates to what it is morally acceptable for schools to do. Even if teachers avoid the above extremes, **could** their teaching still be open to moral criticism? A second is whether the analysis offered by Barrow and Woods helps teachers to consider what they **should** do. These questions cannot be answered without reference to what is valued in education.

Some of the important issues that educators have to grapple with are practical and ethical, and are not confined to avoiding the morally unacceptable. A pressing question is how schools are to deal with controversial issues. Many would argue that schools have an important role in equipping young people to discuss them. On the other hand, teachers are rightly required to refrain from imposing their own views on students on political, religious or moral issues, and from seeking to exercise undue influence on them. Such influence-seeking and imposing of beliefs could be seen as indoctrinatory, even though not meeting the criteria offered by Barrow and Woods.

We should be alarmed if schools simply saw their role as avoiding the discussion of anything controversial. Such a bland role would be unhelpful to young people who are soon to take their place as citizens and are expected to form reasoned opinions of their own. We should also be alarmed if schools became hotbeds of dissent. There may be times when a school needs to set limits on what can be debated. If schools court controversy, they risk becoming controversial and losing the trust of parents and their local community. Barrow and Woods are not so helpful in assisting teachers and schools to think about their important role in developing students' capacity for critical thinking, their moral sensibilities, and respect for the opinions of others. These roles call for wise action and prudent judgement to which philosophy of education ought to make a major contribution.

Another important contribution of philosophy to thinking about education is to clarify the role of educational discourse, and analyse how such discourse shapes our perceptions and can recommend certain actions. Murray Edelman, a political scientist, characterized teachers along with social workers and other "helping professionals" as people who constitute "crucial influences upon beliefs and political action because they present themselves and are widely accepted as legitimate authorities on the causes of problems and how to treat them" (*Political language: words that succeed and policies that fail*, Academic Press, New York, 1977, p. 20). Discourse about teaching reflects an understanding of schooling and is rich in assumptions about its nature and social context. Indeed, our authors adopt the term 'schooling' in their preface to the second edition (1982) to indicate the range of their study, and take education to be one of many possible concerns of school.

Fashions in educational discourse may privilege some descriptions and sanction some responses over others. For example, the term 'Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder', abbreviated to 'ADHD', is applied to a propensity of young people whose behaviour is seen by some teachers as impeding their ability to learn. Thus a medical or scientific term is used to persuade parents, other teachers and professionals that a child so described has an illness and should be treated accordingly. One may ask why such a description has become prevalent only in recent years – presumably the behaviours are not new though the description is. It could be said that this kind of description has become more prevalent and persistent with the comparatively recent development and availability of drugs that are intended to control or alleviate behaviours that are grouped under the heading ADHD.

There may, of course, be clear cases of behaviours that can be described as instances of ADHD, but the danger is that this kind of term gets applied to a range of behaviour where it is no longer clear that there is some form of disease. Alternative characterisations which challenge assumptions embedded in this kind of discourse are

less likely to be used or countenanced when those who are seen to be experts choose to use a medical or scientific description which locates the problem within the child, and not, for example, in how teachers interact with children or expect them to behave in the classroom. These alternative characterisations may be neglected once teachers and other professionals opt for a term such as 'ADHD' to label persistently inattentive behaviour. Forms of educational discourse direct attention to what is being valued, and the assumptions embedded in these linguistic preferences can even block out alternative perspectives. They also exert a powerful influence in channelling effort and initiatives in some directions and away from others.

If philosophical analysis is to be of service to thinking about education, it needs to look at how educational discourse is used to locate problems and suggest solutions, and also at how assumptions are made which may well limit our understanding and restrict possibilities for action. Many of the key ideas which Barrow and Woods have chosen as the focus of their book seem to be removed from the "push and shove" of educational discourse. In some ways, concepts such as those expressed in words such as 'knowledge', 'understanding', 'rationality' and 'creativity' have become detached specimens, as it were, especially designed for philosophical analysis. That task is undertaken seriously by the authors, but there is a price to be paid for such detachment. The authors do not direct attention nearly enough, in my opinion, to asking how day-to-day educational discourse embodies and solidifies certain assumptions about the nature and context of teaching and schooling. They need to ask how educational discourse is used to favour some conceptions of teaching and schooling over others, and how those engaged in the business of education can too easily become victims of their own words. Keeping us alert to these risks and providing us with some tools to keep our thinking sharp and clear is an invaluable role for philosophy in education. My worry is that Barrow and Woods have not entered nearly as much as they should into this arena. Such lack of involvement may explain to some extent why interest in philosophy of education has declined in universities in recent years.