

Book Review: Priestley, VC of Melbourne, Diaries

Raymond Priestley, *The Diary of a Vice-Chancellor. University of Melbourne 1935-1938*, ed. Ronald Ridley, Melbourne University Press, 2002, pp xxxvii + 555, price??, ISBN 0 522 84985 7

I was intrigued by the invitation to review the Priestley diaries: I served as a Vice-Chancellor for some time too, I once edited someone else's diaries for publication, and I was born, in 1937, when he was contemplating resigning his post.

Priestley was a man of many parts – geologist, Antarctic explorer with Shackleton and Scott, a Military Cross recipient during the Great War and a historian of that conflict as well, an educational administrator at Cambridge, and Vice-Chancellor first at Melbourne and then, for a much longer period, at Birmingham. Though born and educated in England he had important Australian connections, for his fellow geologist on Shackleton's early expedition was Edgeworth David, while Griffith Taylor was a colleague on the Scott expedition (and then married Priestley's sister). A close friend in Cambridge and during the war was Samuel Wadham, Melbourne's Professor of Agriculture.

Priestley was Melbourne's first salaried Vice-Chancellor, at a time when the office of Vice-Chancellor was an uncertain thing in Australia. He established himself and his role with some difficulty, his Chancellor seeing no need for another layer of management between himself and his Registrar. Priestley came at an appalling time for the University, though it was one that demanded a strong executive. Melbourne was poorly funded even by Australian standards, while the community of Melbourne seemed indifferent to it save as a degree shop, and indeed 'The Shop' was its common nickname. The Melbourne establishment, awash with knights, saw it almost as a possession, and Priestley had to endure some patronising talk by some of its members. He did have some allies, especially among the younger professors like Kenneth Bailey and Douglas Copland, and the students plainly thought he was a good thing. He was, of course, Somebody Famous, who could enthral audiences with 'polar tales', but he was also a man of talent, intellect and integrity, and these qualities shine through the diaries.

He needed a good sense of himself and a good sense of humour as well, and he had both. The diaries are full of good yarns about eccentric Melbourne academics, a couple of which I heard about eccentric academics at another university altogether when I was an undergraduate twenty years later. New stories that gave me great pleasure included one about a Johns Hopkins physicist deeply involved in research. 'What about your students?' someone asked him. 'I neglect them, Sir. I neglect them!' And I liked the neat distinction made by Wittgenstein (yes, another of Priestley's friends) between 'the work you live for and the work you live by'.

I doubt that one can be a successful Vice-Chancellor unless one has a coherent and consistent view of the purposes of higher education. Priestley was in no doubt about his own. Universities were there to instil a high ethic into the professional classes. If that was not done, a university was little more than a bunch of professional schools. His worry about the state of play at Melbourne in the mid 1930s would probably be echoed by many contemporary Australian vice-chancellors. 'We are up against the usual troubles that exist in the teaching of professional subjects: a tendency to concentrate on pumping details into men instead of teaching them how to think, read and reason' (p. 46), and adding new things without subtracting anything. Melbourne did have women staff and students, and he was supportive of the women staff; but his all-embracing 'men' is characteristic of the time.

He thought that research was important, but if pushed to the wall 'The University's first duty would be to provide inspiring teaching' (p.538), which you couldn't have without somebody doing research. Academics at Melbourne had plenty of time for that, he thought, but they needed money and interested colleagues. Most departments were quite small by today's reckoning, a professor and two or three lecturers being common. One of his professorial foes said to him that doing research in Australia was 'like a musician playing to an empty hall', a metaphor that captures the context well. He thought that higher education was too important to be left to the States, and saw it as a proper responsibility of the Commonwealth. He said so to Menzies and Casey, but in this aspiration he was ahead of his time. Indeed Casey was at the time trying to get back a tiny amount of Commonwealth funding for research that went to the universities via the CSIR, and was quite unsympathetic.

Priestley hated the money-raising role of the vice-chancellor, though on the evidence he was impressively good

at it. He was also properly courageous in defending the right of his staff to speak out in public on public issues. He thought Australia was more likely to go Fascist or Communist than Britain because Australia lacked a strong tradition of liberal thought. He was surely right about the 1930s, and we still lack any kind of established tradition of liberal thought.

The book is a great read. Priestley dressed for dinner at home and dined at the Melbourne Club, but I would put him well to the left of centre in politics and I'm sorry that Australia saw so little of him. This is plainly the view of the editor of the diaries, who has done a superb job. MUP has produced a handsome book, and the photo of R. G. Menzies on the tennis court is a gem!

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