

Donald William Rawson

Born: Melbourne, 23 March 1930

Died: Canberra, 20 June 1997

by Don Aitkin

Don Rawson was known and respected across the Australian universities and outside them. A historian and political scientist, he was one of those who developed political science in the postwar years, and in doing so made his own name as the foremost student of the Labor Party and of trade unions.

A generation of students has cause to remember him with affection, not only because of his own writings, which were models of clarity and sense, but because he spent much of his energy in building research tools for others to use, a form of scholarly production which is more widely praised than practised.

He was born in Melbourne in 1930, the single child of a singular family. His father Roy Rawson, a notable radical, owned the bookshop which bore his name, and became a Labor parliamentarian in Victoria in the 1950s. His mother, like Roy an Esperantist, ran a dress shop in Camberwell which catered to the bourgeoisie rather than to the working class.

Throughout his life Don maintained a strong commitment to the ideals of social justice which to him represented Labor at its best, and he did so with exemplary good manners. While he had no doubt of the importance of trade unions, and did much to make their study respectable within the academic world, his intellectual interests were wide and extended late in life into theology.

He studied history at Melbourne University after schooling at Melbourne Boys High, and received first-class honours for his first two degrees. He moved into political science during his PhD work, a journey which took him also from Melbourne to the Australian National University in Canberra. Apart from four years spent at the University of Queensland in the 1960s, he was to spend the rest of his working life in Canberra.

His PhD thesis on the organisation of the ALP from the conscription split in 1916 to the coming to power of the Curtin Government in 1941 is probably the best-known thesis on an Australian subject never to have been published. No doubt he had publication in mind. but an increasing interest in the domain of contemporary electoral politics, which produced a book on the politics of the NSW federal seat of Eden-Monaro and the first study of an Australian general election, kept the revision of his thesis on the back burner.

He was an excellent supervisor and mentor who was something of a magnet for younger scholars. In 1960, when I was a young graduate student at the University of New England, Don Rawson came to give a paper at a conference on decentralisation, a topic close to the concerns of my thesis.

It was a good conference in any terms, and enlivened by a sparkling and good-humoured after-dinner speech by Arthur Calwell. But it was Don Rawson who captured my interest. A few years older than myself, he spoke with clarity and wit, and in private conversation afterwards came across as outgoing, helpful and

perceptive. He was that rarest of all audiences for the postgraduate student — someone who knew what you were on about and why it was important.

Once I had talked with him I had a clear goal: to go to the ANU and do a PhD, with Don Rawson as my supervisor. He became the facilitator of that dream, and in early 1961 I joined his department. But by then he had gone to the University of Queensland. When my own thesis was finished he became one of its examiners. After a period overseas I returned to that department as a research fellow to discover that he had rejoined it.

We formed a close friendship almost at once. He was supportive of what I wanted to do, gently purged my ideas of their excess, and kept me on track. He was a patient reader of drafts, a critic of sloppy thinking and writing, and a defender, if he thought you were being unfairly attacked in seminars or conferences.

His great contribution was to make the study of Australian politics an ordinary activity in universities. Perhaps more pertinently, he made the study of the Labor Party, of trade unions and of the arbitration system a matter that should be approached with care and a lack of partisanship, but not without passion.

It is probably true that his own perspective on the ALP — that it should above all be concerned with issues of social justice — finally became the orthodox picture of the party held by its own senior members, an amazing change if one had lived through the 1950s and 1960s, when the cold war, the DLP and ‘communism’ were the staples of discussion about Labor.

For me his contribution was to make our discipline (I too came to political science as a PhD student after an initial preparation in history) a set of ideas and practices that ought to have a practical outcome: we were there to help our country improve its political processes and its political outcomes.

Though he once defended his work in the mathematics of political science as simply pleasurable in itself, I feel that if he had constructed a motto for political science it would have been the command ‘Be Useful!’. Everything he did fitted that motto, from his supervision and encouragement of students to his work for the University’s staff association and later the NTEU, in which he was held in the highest regard on both sides.

At 60 he discovered that he had cancer of the prostate, and he endured that disease with the calm strength which was in part his natural temperament and in part the virtue of his recent conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. He is survived by his wife Mary Dickenson, and by a daughter Helen and her two children. His spirit lives on in all that is best in Australian universities.

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