

An Enduring Challenge

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Master 1968-80

Viewed in historical perspective, twenty five years is not really a very long time. It may seem more impressive if expressed as a quarter of a century. Even so, as against several colleges of Australia's older universities, Robb may now be regarded as approaching its adolescence; in comparison with college institutions at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham, it is still in its infancy. As yet greater contrast is the fact that China's first residential university was established under government sponsorship in 124 B.C. and its educative traditions persisted until the present century.

The challenge to continue Robb's progression is not so daunting as it is exciting. Within the context outlined above, Robb College has been remarkably precocious. In the two and a half decades since its foundation it has firmly established its own well-respected identity. Already several of its graduates have gained for it, and for themselves, considerable prestige in various countries overseas while undoubtedly it has also earned warm recognition throughout Australia.

It may be argued that, unlike the older colleges of Sydney and Melbourne Universities for example, Robb was not inhibited by the prescriptions of 19th Century denominational founders and benefactors. That is so. But its success thus far by no means reflects an absence of administrative hurdles and handicaps. As a university-sponsored and government-funded foundation it needed to overcome, determinedly, the impositions of impersonal bureaucracies in order to achieve its present status.

In 1960 when the decision was taken to found a new college and to name it after the then late Registrar, William Menzies Robb, there already existed Wright and Earle Page as strictly male residences each comprising several separate timber blocks of rooms; also there were Mary White and Duval as brick-built female sanctuaries. And the U.N.E. Council maintained a strict jurisdiction over them all. The Robb Buildings were designed by Architect Peter Hall who subsequently augmented his professional



Robb has always attracted distinguished members of the academic and wider community to its Senior Common Room. The first office bearers of the SCR in 1960 were: (back row) Assoc Prof A.F. Horadam, Assoc Prof H.J. (Larry) Harrington, Mr D.R. Bewley; (seated) Prof B.L.D. Coghlan, Mr Albert Bussell (Vice Master), Mr Ben Meredith (Master), Prof J.M. Somerville (Senior Fellow) and Dr K.S.W. Campbell. Photo: Courtesy of Mrs Cherry Robertson of Armidale.

reputation by his successful completion of the Sydney Opera House. Robb's dining hall block of local basalt walls, impressive vaulted concrete ceilings and parquet floors of brush box soon became a showpiece for Australian and international visitors.

For at least the first ten years of Robb's existence, college residence remained compulsory for all full-time undergraduates. Residence fees as approved by Council were uniform across the campus and no choice of college was allowed; instead the College Heads were required, ludicrously and laboriously, to draw individual names of their respective intake from a relevant (male or female) 'lucky dip' bin! Visiting hours as between residents of the segregated colleges were restricted by Council to one officially nominated weekday evening until 9.30 p.m. and on Saturday until 11 p.m. Predictably the students soon discovered there was nothing that might be done at other times which could not be performed within those set hours! All contraceptive pills were totally banned on campus and the number of unwanted pregnancies increased formidably. Yet worse for some members was the fact that, within the uniform residence fee, an average ingredient cost per meal was likewise decreed; inevitably there was recurrent acrimony because Robb's food costs sometimes allegedly exceeded that figure.

Such restrictions served as a challenge. A reaction by Duval was the locking of all its doors soon after each evening meal and it became known as 'The Fort'. Perhaps a highlight to progress by the gentlemen of Robb was a midnight rooftop raid on inner-courtyard laundry lines of The Fort and the pegging of captured feminine garments onto the public fencing of the Mad Mile.

The challenges to Robb's internal administration posed more serious provocation. All concerned protested goodwill, but only after prolonged controversy and negotiation was relative autonomy achieved for the colleges. By a government ruling the price was repayment in full of the extent to which they had been subsidized by the University over previous years. A happily successful consequence of that ruling was formation of the UNE Conference Centre to earn extra funds. Repayment of past subsidies having been accomplished, all colleges now benefit considerably from

conference proceeds and Robb's initially major involvement in this enterprise attracted envious attention from similar institutions far and wide. Residence was no longer mandatory for undergraduates.

Each of the U.N.E. colleges now sets its own fees, its own codes of domestic behaviour and extra-curricular activity and its own student-vetted regulations. But the colleges can never be divorced from the University of which they comprise an integral faction; nor should they ever wish to be. And the University itself is constrained by the fluctuating policies of Federal and State Governments.

Robb is but one part of a complex whole, but its role in that context offers constant stimulus and scope for initiative. Within this framework already it has gained undeniable prominence and prestige. Therefore it may take justifiable pride in its achievements, but it can never afford to indulge in that type of smugness which leads to stagnation and thus to possible demise. The dedication of its Mastership and loyalty of its staff are repeatedly enlivened by its annually renewed intake of students, while the generous contribution of personal time and interest by its Fellows and Tutors ensures that it merits the designation 'college', rather than mere 'hostel'.

If there be any valid message to be drawn from the experience of the past twenty five years, surely it must be that neither its administrators nor its students know all the answers to all its future problems. That challenge can be met successfully only by sincere and continuing co-operation between these two elements. And thus, we trust, the College will endure happily for many multiples of its first quarter-century.

In the words of William Wordsworth:

"No fears to beat away - no strife
to heal,
The past unsighed for, and the
future sure."

May it be so for Robb!

"Shetland wool comes from Shetland
ponies, doesn't it?" - Joco.