

Fellowship, Fun and Frustrations at UNE

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The University of New England was quite a different place when I first arrived in January 1955, to do an Agriculture Honours year in Plant Ecology. This was the first full year of autonomy of the previous University of New England College – an offshoot of the University of Sydney. There were about three hundred students who lived either in town houses (men and women separate) or in wooden housing blocks on campus. Blocks A and B were for women students (near the present Ecosystem Management building) and Blocks C and D for men (where the Arts Building now stands). Busses collected the students from the town houses in the morning and took them back in the evening. All the students had their meals in the Beverly, a wooden building on the site of External Studies or the Booloominbar dining room, now extended to house the Booloominbar Collection.

“Bool” was both the social and administrative centre of the University. The present Vice Chancellor’s office was the student common room complete with record player and tea and coffee making facilities, vying with Bruin’s hotel in Beardy St as a place for social gatherings in the evenings or the weekends. We all wore black gowns to lectures, complete with blue velvet bars on both lapels to indicate our year of studies. I had five of these as Agriculture at Sydney was then a four-year degree with a fifth year for honours.

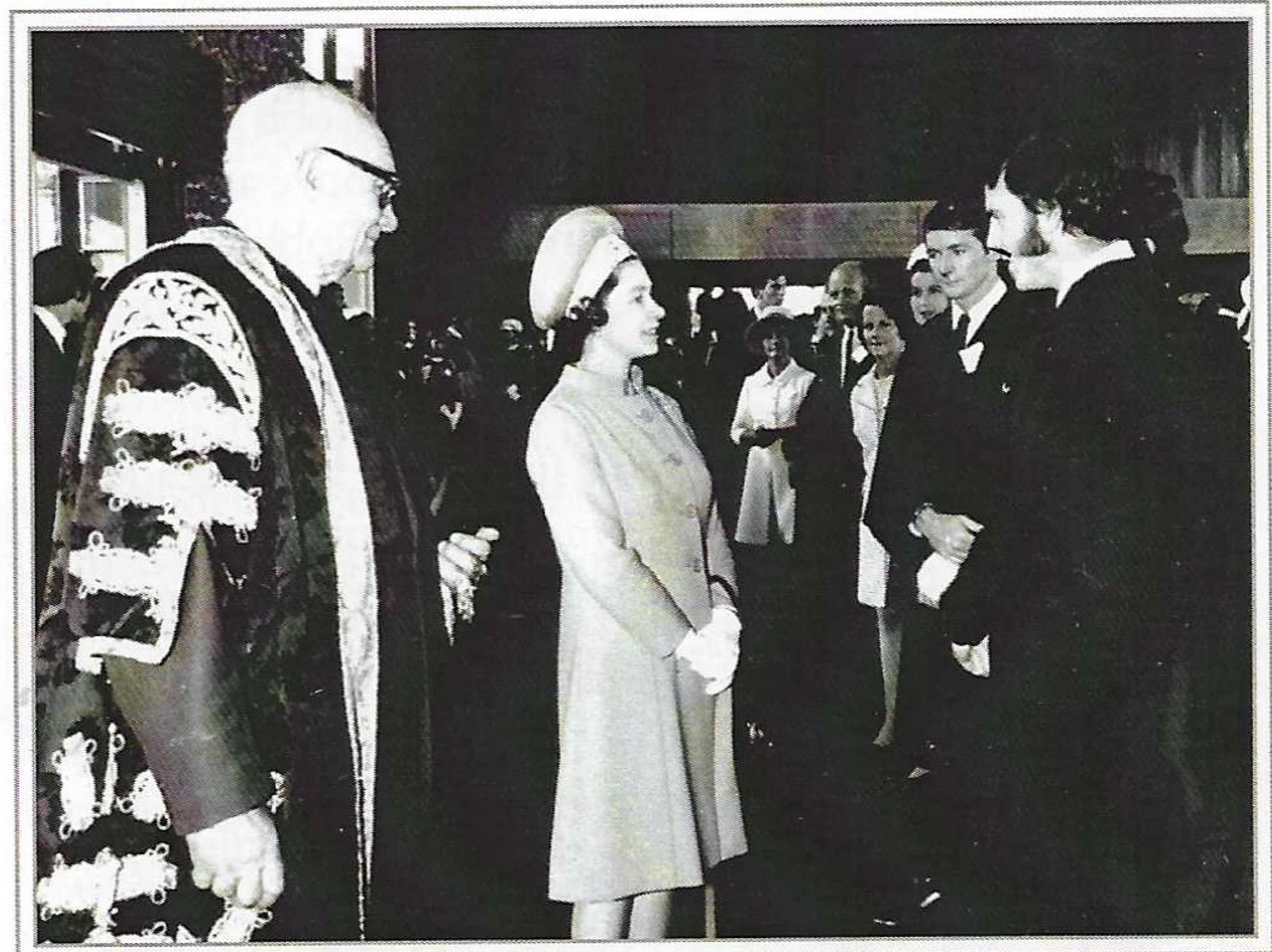
I joined the then Aerostatic Society (one joined by simply joining in the Society’s activities) which held occasional hot air balloon ascensions. The hot air balloons comprised a round base of thin wire with a body of tissue paper glued together and fired with cotton wool soaked in methylated spirits held in a loop of the wire at the bottom. They had a small hole at the top to let the hot air out and to provide stability. I understand that in 1957 after I had left, the Society held a night-time balloon ascension which floated over the town in the early evening and was mistaken by the Armidale populace for Sputnik which had just been sent into orbit by the Russians!

Ten years later I came back as a lecturer in Botany on the long weekend in October 1965, and spent the first couple of weeks in the upstairs flat in North Court of Robb while finding a house for my young family, then staying in Sydney. Robb housed only male students at that time. Ben Meredith was the Master and the Senior Common Room comprised Tutors (mostly PhD students) plus Non-Resident Fellows who were all academic staff of the University. Most of the Non-Resident Fellows would walk down to the College for lunch with the students and many would drop in to the SCR for a drink and a chat on the way home in the evening. I loved the sign on the table in

the SCR – “We do not partake of sherry before 5.30 pm”.

I was invited to join the Senior Common Room as a Non-Resident Fellow by the new Master, Mick Sinclair-Wilson, in 1969 and have been a member ever since. Mick was extremely flamboyant, theatrical and a heavy smoker and towards the end of an incredible career. Helen, his wife, was a perfect foil and was steadfast and motherly, and much-loved by the students. Helen now lives in England and we still exchange Christmas Cards. They had two boys and a holiday house, first at Noosa Heads and later at Mylestom. At one stage, they had a pet water dragon (a species of local lizard) and when they went away to Noosa, they would simply put it in the crisper at the bottom of their ‘fridge and it would promptly hibernate. When they returned, they would put it in a warm bath to wake it up.

An early highlight of this decade was the visit of Queen Elizabeth II, the Duke of Edinburgh and Princess Anne to Robb College on the 28th April, 1970. Ever inventive, the Robb students constructed a wooden, white-gloved hand to present to her to use for her famous stiff-handed wave from moving cars. The Queen thought it was great and asked the students to put it in her car. The security men would not allow it but the Queen later sent a royal messenger to retrieve it. Somewhere in the Royal Palaces of England is a white-gloved wooden hand constructed by Robb College students.



Formal Dinners were held once a week on Wednesday evenings and on other days, many of us would have coffee in the SCR after lunch and so Robb was an important part of our social activities. Mick would also produce a play each year and so theatre was very much a part of Robb life. Although the Dining Hall was designed for theatre with the stage and the two entrances, the acoustics were so poor with the bare, arched concrete ceiling that it could not be used for this purpose. The performances were held elsewhere and later, in the Arts Theatre. Much time, effort and experimentation was put into improving the acoustics all to no avail at that stage.

Excessive alcohol consumption was then, as now, a great problem in the community and in the College. Many hours were spent in workshops with students and student leaders and in discussing strategies and approaches but really, not much progress has been made during the forty years I have been associated with Robb. Smoking was rampant except that one did not smoke at formal dinners until sweets had been served. I have never liked the smell of cigarette smoke

and in 1972, I spent a year at Utah State University where the question "Do you mind if I smoke?" had real meaning. If you were asked the question and answered that you did not like it, then that was the end of the matter. On my return from Utah, I happened to be sitting next to Mick at a formal dinner and when sweets were served, Mick took out his cigarettes and asked the inevitable question. I replied, "Well, yes I do, actually, because I don't like the smell of smoke". Somewhat startled by my response, Mick stared at me for about three seconds and then said, "Well, that's tough then." and proceeded to light up!

The late 1960s and early 1970s were periods of high student demand at UNE and Robb, with only three of its planned four courts completed, was hopeful that the fourth would be funded. Funds were actually provided by the Federal Government (I can't remember how much) in about 1973 but the University Administration, (Alec Lazenby was Vice-Chancellor at the time) diverted the funds for the construction of the then Claude Street Flats (now Wright Village) and so Robb missed out. Each College was responsible for its own finances in those days, and with just over 200 beds, Robb has always found it difficult to build up a sufficiently large reserve of funds to see it through hard times when students were scarce. This was the first major frustration in my association with Robb over the years.

By the end of the 1970s, the numbers of internal students choosing to come to UNE had declined and Robb was far from full. All the other colleges except for Robb had gone co-educational but Mick had resisted the move as long as possible. Finally, women were admitted to Robb in 1977 but North Court remained the last male bastion for more than a decade.

The 1980s was perhaps the most fun of the four decades of my association with Robb. Jim Irvine took over as Head in 1981 and immediately set about raising the national profile of Robb with the Prudential/Rotary Cape to Cape Run project. This project introduced Robb students to Rotary Clubs and their communities in dozens of communities from Mossman, Cape York Peninsular to Wilson's Promontory in Victoria and raised about \$60,000 for the Australian Foundation for Disabled Students. These funds are held in trust by the University and have now grown to nearly \$250,000. The result was that Robb was essentially full for the next ten years and attracted students with a wide range of talents. It was a vibrant and exciting community and the SCR was very much a part of it and there were regular combined JCR/SCR social and pseudo-sporting activities. Both SRC and JCR members gained much from these activities and they were great fun.

Jim had the ability to locate and persuade people from the Armidale and University community to give their time and talents to Robb. Peter Hall from the Robb SCR took over as the moving force behind Robb theatrical productions until 1984. Then, Jim Graham, a history teacher from TAS with enormous theatrical talents, was persuaded to join the SCR and continue the tradition of theatrical performances by Robb students started by Ben Meredith and continued by Mick. When Jim Graham retired to the coast, this tradition was continued by Alice Coventry. These performances were sometimes very ambitious and included such gems as "South Pacific", "Oklahoma" and many others.

Very talented SCR and JCR members such as Peter Hall, Mike Knowling, Geoff Perry, and Amanda Bishop ensured that these productions were of an incredibly high standard. Sadly, this tradition came to an end with the tragic death of Alice Coventry from MS in 2001.

The pseudo-sporting activities mostly emanated from John Corbett, a retired researcher in animal nutrition from the CSIRO at Chiswick and involved competitions between the SCR and the JCR. We held an annual 'Nonathlon' for a number of years and somewhere there is a trophy for the winner designed and built by John. If a 'Triathlon' involves three events, then a 'Nonathlon' involves nine. The events varied from year to year but included items such as tiddly-winks, billy boiling and nail driving competitions. The latter was a race to drive three-inch nails into a four-inch piece of hardwood. The champion at this activity was Gordon MacAulay, a Professor of Agricultural Economics.

Formal dinners with imaginative themes, including the annual Fellows' Dinner for the SCR at the end of the year, were common during this decade and continued until the turn of the century. We had a Scottish dinner (complete with a genuine haggis) organised by Mike Knowling - a true Scot - as well as a whisky tasting evening. The weather cooperated wonderfully one year when we put on a Christmas Dinner in July, complete with snow falling steadily outside throughout the evening. Themes for Fellows' Dinners included participants coming as famous criminals or a Greek dinner. The menu would also reflect the theme.

The tradition of Robb students breaking records from the Guinness Book of Records (or creating new ones) started in 1987 and the most recent one was in 2007. The records include the worlds longest continuous netball game, the world's largest painting and the longest distance travelled around a course by a team of four roller-bladers in 24 hours. Each record involves an enormous amount of work by the students doing the organisation and the resultant positive publicity is great for the College and University. Furthermore, the students learn a lot about dealing with bureaucracy which stands them in good stead throughout their lives.

The UNE Colleges were originally conceived as Australian variants of the 'Oxbridge' model of communities of scholars in which staff and students interacted at a range of levels to complement the formal lecture/practical class/seminar university situations. The early academic staff of the newly independent University of New England embraced this ideal with enthusiasm, but after about 20 years, many of them thought of the colleges (including Robb) as institutions that were expensive to run and which distracted students from their studies by too much drinking and sporting activities. During the mid-1980s, when I was the elected Dean of Science for three years, I was able to set up a system with the enthusiastic assistance of Alan McKenzie, then Head of Austin, where students coming to the University with inadequate backgrounds in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics, were compelled to attend remedial tutoring sessions in the Colleges run by tutors selected by the relevant Academic Departments and paid for by the Faculty. This system worked well for about four years but was then discontinued when the Faculties were re-organised in 1991.

The Robb College Foundation was formed in 1987 essentially as a fund raising body to assist the Head of College as requested. It is registered under the NSW Companies Act and donations are tax deductible. I strongly supported its formation from the very beginning because I believed that the University's commitment to the Colleges was not rock solid and that the Head could well need both financial and other support from an independent body, mostly comprised of ex-Robbers of various sorts. The Foundation provided some of the first computers for student use and the first major project was the coating of the Dining Hall ceiling with sound-absorbing fibre in about 1994. This came about following the refurbishment of the Armidale Town Hall about a year earlier and the then Head, Jan Wyles, was impressed with the improvement of the acoustics after completion. She met the architect responsible, and mentioned the Robb Dining Hall problem. The result was the recommendation of the application of the present coating which made a dramatic difference at a cost of about \$20,000. It was now possible to hold theatrical productions in the Dining Hall, but sadly, the last one was *South Pacific* in 2000.

The 1990s were a turbulent time for the University in general and Robb in particular. The first was the Dawkins re-organisation of tertiary education in Australia with an increase in the number of universities from 19 to 39 and the amalgamation of UNE with the Armidale CAE, the then Lismore CAE (now Southern Cross University) the Coffs Harbour campus (previously started by UNE) and the Orange Agricultural College in 1990. This multi-campus University proved unworkable and was broken up so that the two amalgamated Armidale campuses became the University of New England. This new entity was substantially less well off than before amalgamation because it had been stripped of financial assets that had been carefully accumulated over many years. A year after amalgamation, the Faculties were re-organised including the amalgamation of the previous Faculties of Science, Rural Science and Resource Management into the Faculty of the Sciences. In 1997, the previous Academic Departments were abolished and amalgamated into Schools. All these changes had an indirect impact on the colleges in that, with the financial strictures experienced in the academic area, the view strengthened that the colleges were an expensive anachronism that the University could ill afford.

The turn of the century saw the threats to the college system gather strength in the University administration. Very little money had been spent on maintenance during the 1990s and the University Estates and Facilities did an internal audit estimating the cost of refurbishing or replacing the college infrastructure. I became the Chair of the Robb Foundation in 1999, and by about 2002 we had accumulated about \$100,000 and we were determined to do something about the rapidly deteriorating Robb buildings. We persuaded the University to commence replacing the wooded cladding on the College walls with insulated metal cladding and the wooden window frames with aluminium. We spent \$70,000 doing the walls of the courtyard of North Court with the University meeting the rest of the cost.

The college system was overflowing with students at the time and so we obtained approval to produce a concept plan for the long-awaited East court involving a radical

design with some double rooms and all with en-suite bathrooms. The estimated cost was \$5 million and the cost of the concept plans was about \$17,000. The Foundation then spent some more money learning about serious fundraising and started an appeal to raise funds for east court in 2003. Our target was \$2.5 million with the hope that we could persuade the University to obtain Federal funds to match our funds if we could raise this amount. However, just after we had launched our appeal, the then Head of Robb, Michael Maas and I were told at a Robb/Albies Rugby match that we had better stop the appeal because the University was going to bulldoze Robb as part of a re-organisation of the whole college system. This was my second great frustration in my association with Robb.

In 2007, the Federal Government granted \$2.5 million for the building of East Court of Robb provided the University would match the funds. Apparently, the application for these funds had been included in a submission some years before when we had just completed the concept plans. The University administration were as surprised as we were when the funds were announced. Despite our best efforts, the then Head of Robb, Jan Moran and I were told firmly by the then Vice-Chancellor that there was no chance that the funds would go to East Court and the University would approach the Federal Government with alternative suggestions for their use. In due course, they were used for the refurbishment of Mary White College. Many of the ideas we incorporated in the concept design for East Court were included in the Mary White refurbishment. This was my third major frustration.

The most serious threat to the College system came at the beginning of 2008. The proposal was to call for tenders for the outsourcing of the running of the colleges from the accommodation industry. The Robb Foundation, being independent of the University played a major role in the campaign against this proposal. Had it come to fruition, it would have meant the end of the college system as it had been envisaged by the administration of the new University of New England in the mid-1950s. The Robb Foundation worked very hard to influence the thinking of University administration with respect to the future of the residential system. I, as Chair, had to find a way through the sound-proof ceiling that has been progressively erected by the University administration since about the turn of the century.

The arrival of the new Vice-Chancellor, Professor Jim Barber, has meant the turning of the tide for the colleges in general and Robb in particular. How far the tide will come in, remains to be seen. Jim Barber sees the residential system as one of the great strengths of the University of New England and the means by which it will survive the changes in funding for Australian Universities to come about in 2012. In addition, he now takes the Robb Foundation seriously and the present Chair, Jim Irvine, is investigating how the Foundation can best assist in the Project 2012 Strategic Initiative. Events over the last six months of Robb's 50th year have been the most encouraging since the beginning of the 1990s. I look forward to more years of fellowship and fun as part of Robb College but no longer have the strength to be fully engaged in the rough and tumble of University politics. It is over to you, the inheritors of a College unique among residences at Universities.