

Chapter 2. The University Years, 1933 to 1940

Selection of Course

Although I had failed to get a bursary, my parents were determined that I should go to the university; naturally, to the University of Adelaide, then the only university in South Australia. With the exposure that I had had to geology, it was not surprising that I wanted to do science, majoring in geology. However, my father dissuaded me. My year of entry was 1933, before the mineral boom of the 1940s. He pointed out that there were very few jobs in geology; besides the Government Geologist (one job, held by Dr L. Keith Ward, brother of the Professor of Bacteriology in Sydney, whom I later came to know very well), the number of positions at the university had just been expanded by 33 per cent by the appointment of Kleeman as a lecturer. Further, Father had observed that when he was studying biology and geology at the University of Melbourne in 1910–12 there were many ‘duffers’ there studying medicine who were now getting salaries three or four times as high as his, and, more importantly, that there was a much wider range of choice in professional courses such as medicine and engineering than in a specialized field of science. If I wanted to, he suggested, I could become a physician, a surgeon (both with many potential specialties), a pathologist, a general practitioner or even a research worker. I accepted his argument, but then had to spend a good deal of time studying Latin to Intermediate level, since this was a required subject for entry to medicine. Ever since, I have found it useful in understanding the origins of many English words, but I did not do enough Latin to get a feel for Roman culture.

In 1933, since the courses in Physics and Chemistry for First Year Science and Medicine at the university covered much the same ground as those in Leaving Honours, and medical students did only one term of Botany and two terms of Zoology, I initially enrolled in the Faculty of Science and did a full year course in Botany and Zoology. I won the John Bagot Scholarship for Botany, but was unable to accept it because I had transferred to Second Year Medicine. I also received the top credit in Zoology and a credit in Chemistry.

Medicine, 1934 to 1938

Since there was no examination at the end of second year, which was largely devoted to anatomy (four students to a human cadaver), I took First Year Geology as an evening student, with Sir Douglas Mawson and Dr Cecil Madigan as teachers; I received a credit at the end-of-year examination. I had joined the Science Students Association during my first year, maintained my association

with it throughout my time at Adelaide University, and was elected its President in 1937.

I did quite well in medical studies in the succeeding years, gaining top place and Dr Davies Thomas Scholarships in 1935 and 1936, and the Lister Prize for Clinical Surgery in 1937. However, to my disgust (which I can still vividly remember), I obtained only third place in the final year examinations. It was a small compensation to gain the Dr Charles Gosse Medal for Ophthalmology.

In the summer of 1937–38 there was a severe outbreak of poliomyelitis in Australia. The Northfield Infectious Disease Hospital appealed to fifth year students for help, and a friend and somewhat older colleague, David Shepherd (who was already a qualified pharmacist) and I volunteered and spent the long vacation working there, mostly on poliomyelitis and diphtheria. I was not worried about ‘infantile paralysis’, as poliomyelitis was then called, but my confidence was undermined when, soon after my arrival, I admitted a young man with paralysis who had been in the same class as me at Rose Park Primary School. The Superintendent of Northfield Hospital at the time, Dr Alan Finger, was an active and sincere Communist. Although I read, and indeed still have, some of the books about communism that he gave me, I refused his invitations to attend meetings, and have in fact never attended a political meeting of any kind. However, for some time after enlistment in the Australian Army, all my outgoing letters were opened and censored (the convention was that officers censored their own letters). I was unaware of this until much later. I enjoyed my time at Northfield, doing laboratory work, mainly diagnosis of diphtheria, and helping with patients of all kinds. In addition, I had my first experiments with sex there, with an older and wiser nurse, who was very tolerant of my ‘falling in love’ with her.

Activities in Student Affairs

I took an active part in student affairs at the university and was a member of various students' committees: Union, Science Students, Medical Students and Sports Association. I gained a University ‘Blue’ for hockey in 1936, and was captain of the Adelaide University hockey team in 1937 and 1938. As I relate below, in 1936 I became associated with Professor Frederic Wood Jones, FRS, Professor of Anatomy in the University of Melbourne. In 1935, he had established the McCoy Society for Field Investigation and Research (named after Professor Sir Frederick McCoy, the first Professor of Natural Science at Melbourne University), which arranged for staff and students to carry out biological surveys of interesting places in Victoria during vacations (Ashton, 2001). Stimulated by this, I persuaded Cecil Madigan (Senior Lecturer in Geology) to establish a ‘Tate’ Society (named after Ralph Tate, an early South Australian naturalist) and



Figure 2.1. Adelaide University Hockey Club, Inter-varsity team, Brisbane 1937

Front row: J. E. Kelly, N. C. Hargrave, A. W. Cocks, F. J. Fenner (captain), R. Motteram, W. M. Rolland, M. C. Newland.

Rear row: J. T. Hutton, G. M. Turnbull, M. C. Knight, B. L. G. Johns, J. McPhie.

participated in its first trip, to caves at Swan Reach, in the lower Murray River, in December 1937. Others in the party included Pat Mawson (daughter of Sir Douglas), Roy Sprigg (hon. DSc, ANU, 1980) and Leigh Parkin (later Director of the South Australian Geological Survey). Although another excursion was arranged, to Jankalilla Beach, in December 1938, the Tate Society was an early war casualty.

Studies in Physical Anthropology

As important for the development of my subsequent career as any of the ordinary course-work, was an event that occurred in my second year, 1934, a year when the students spent most of their time dissecting human cadavers. Wood Jones had been Professor of Anatomy in Adelaide from 1919 until 1926. One of his last official acts, before he resigned in 1926 to take up the Rockefeller Chair of Physical Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i, was to successfully recommend that the University Council establish the Board for Anthropological Research, for which Professor J. B. Cleland, the Professor of Pathology, had long lobbied, as a permanent committee of the University (Jones, 1987). The Board organized regular trips to different parts of Central Australia during the August vacations to study Australian Aborigines. Norman Tindale, of the South

Australian Museum, always participated in these expeditions. Because of Wood Jones's interests, anthropometric observations were an important component of their work. In 1933, the Lecturer in Anatomy at the University, Hugo Gray, had made these measurements, but he taken a position in England and no-one was available for the August 1934 expedition to Pandi Pandi, on the Diamantina River, near Birdsville. Probably because of my father's acquaintance with some of the academics involved, notably Dr T. D. Campbell, the head of the Dental School and organizer of the expeditions, I was offered the job.

This was the beginning of a long association with physical anthropology and university and museum staff interested in various aspects of Australian Aborigines and Aboriginal life: Norman B. Tindale, in the Museum, C. P. Mountford, Frederic Wood Jones, Professors T. D. Campbell (Dental School), T. H. Johnston (Zoology) and J. B. Cleland (Pathology), and later an American anthropologist, J. B. Birdsall. The trip to Pandi Pandi was a revelation to me: travelling along the 'Birdsville Track' from Maree to Birdsville; contact with Aborigines of several Central Australian tribes; and the production (with Tindale) of a movie film (16 mm, black and white), an article—'Sandhills and Gibber Plains'—in the Adelaide newspaper, *The Advertiser*, to raise funds for the Board, and my first substantial scientific paper (Fenner, 1934). I went on two subsequent trips: to Nepabunna in the northern Flinders ranges in 1937, and to Eucla in 1939. In 1938, Dr Grenfell Price (then Master of St Mark's College, University of Adelaide), with the support of the State government, organized an expedition to central Australia to examine what were reported to be 'Leichhardt remains'. I was asked to go in case there were any skeletal remains and, although it was August of my final year, I very much looked forward to the prospect of travelling by camel to a remote part of Australia. However, three days before the expedition left I was playing inter-varsity hockey and suffered from a fractured patella, an event that evoked commiserations from *The Bulletin*, August 24, 1938. Nothing of significance was found.

Frederic Wood Jones

Born in London in 1879, Frederic Wood Jones came to Australia as Professor of Anatomy at the University of Adelaide in 1919. He was a highly original scientist, interested in many aspects of biology, and carried out ground-breaking research summarized in his *Mammals of South Australia*, illustrated with his excellent drawings. He was elected a Fellow of The Royal Society in 1925. In 1927 he moved to Hawai'i as Rockefeller Professor of Physical Anthropology and while there wrote his first paper on the non-metrical morphological features of human skulls. He moved to the University of Melbourne in 1929, and from 1936 until 1942, he and I conducted a prolonged correspondence. He

attempted, unsuccessfully, to have my long paper (Fenner, 1939) published in the *Philosophical Proceedings of The Royal Society*. He was a charismatic man, of great mental energy, an outstanding lecturer, with a very facile pen; he published 15 books and over 100 scientific papers (see W. E. Le Gros Clark, 1955).

Contact with Tindale led to other activities associated with the Museum. In December 1934, I was asked to join him on an expedition to Flinders Chase, the major nature reserve on Kangaroo Island, to make insect collections. While there we also discovered and dug out some diprotodon bones, and Tindale included me as a co-author of a short paper on these. During 1935, I developed an interest in Aboriginal skulls, of which the South Australian Museum had an excellent collection. Rather than making formal measurements, as specified by an international agreement (Hrdlicka, 1920), I was attracted to a paper written by Wood Jones on 'non-metrical morphological characters' of skulls (Wood Jones, 1931), and I wrote to him in March 1936 suggesting that I should make a similar study of Australian Aboriginal skulls. He wrote back supporting the idea. Over the period 1936 to 1938, I spent most lunchtimes in the basement of the South Australian Museum, and in the long vacations obtained funds from the David Murray Scholarship Fund of the University of Adelaide to visit museums in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra to examine Aboriginal skulls in their collections. In 1937, I stayed in Beauchamp House in Canberra, opposite the Institute of Anatomy, where the skulls were located. Beauchamp House is now the Ian Potter House of the Australian Academy of Science. I was appointed 'Honorary Craniologist' at the Museum (I believe a unique designation, not politically correct these days) and published one major paper (Fenner, 1939) and several minor papers on these skulls. When I was in Palestine in 1941 (see Chapter 3), I arranged to have these papers submitted for the degree of Doctor of Medicine at the University of Adelaide. After I had submitted evidence from Brigadier Neil Hamilton Fairley, the Director of Medicine in the Australian Army, to the Dean of the Medical School, Sir Trent de Crespigny, that I had 'an advanced knowledge in the principles and practice of medicine', I was awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine (MD) (in absentia) in 1942. The examiners were Professors F. Goldby, of the University of Adelaide, and A. N. Burkitt, of the University of Sydney.

Resident Medical Officer, Adelaide Hospital

I spent the year 1939 as a resident medical officer at the Adelaide Hospital, my first experience of living away from home for a prolonged period. During this period I spent four months as resident physician for Dr S. R. (Ginger) Burston, who was later to become Director-General of Medical Services for the Second Australian Imperial Force (AIF), and as surgical clerk for Mr (later Sir) Ivan Jose.

Although I enjoyed this work, I never intended to practice medicine; I wanted to do research. Hugo Gray had written to me early in 1939, suggesting that I should come to the United Kingdom and get a job in anatomy: 'With its two big lines, human evolution and experimental anatomy, and its temporary dearth of good men, it offers better scope than anything else in medical science.'

By this time, Wood Jones had left Melbourne for Manchester and, in a long letter in April 1939, he told me that anatomy in Britain was at a low ebb. He suggested that I should investigate the possibility of working with Dr E. Weston Hurst, the Director of the newly-established Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science at the Adelaide Hospital. I explored this possibility, and applied for a grant from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) to enable me to undertake research on viruses with him. During the discussions he told me that the two leading virologists in the English-speaking world were C. H. Andrewes, of the National Institute for Medical Research in London, and F. M. Burnet, who, he said, had everything in high degree, especially originality. Much later, I learned that my application to NH&MRC had been unsuccessful. But, on 3 September, 1939, Australia declared war on Germany and plans for the future, for all who had been students in my year, were scrapped.

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