

The Future of the Humanities at Sydney

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Thank you for your invitation to speak tonight. I am delighted to be at this Arts Association function and wish the Association well in bringing Arts graduates back to the University and promoting and defending the humanities in the wide community.

Roaming around the media over the past couple of weeks, I thought that the humanities, the liberal arts and the arts were doing just fine. Andrew Riemer had been given the Geraldine Pascoe Award for journalism for his very erudite and elegant literary criticism. On Radio National, I heard a discussion on the ownership of the Elgin marbles and then an interview on the Macquarie University Classics Summer School and the extension of its offerings this year to include Egyptian hieroglyphics—four people had already enrolled. The third number in the *Sydney Morning Herald's Millennium* series was entitled *Art and Soul*, and across the pages a good number of academics pondered on how art and culture have shaped our world—from creativity to pornography. In September, I attended a dinner in the People's Government House, for the award of the New South Wales Premier's History Awards. The winning works included not only Ken Inglis' monumental study of Australian war memorials but Inga Clendinnen's brilliant meditation on the Holocaust, less obviously connected to Australian political and nationalising agendas. I can hear Inga Clendinnen each week on the radio this month delivering the Boyer lectures. And in the midst of the all the razzle and dazzle 2000 sports mania, the Olympic Games are being accompanied by the cultural Olympics and the Olympics of

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the Mind, in which this university is playing a leading role.

If we are worried about the threat and the reality of globalisation, the increasing cultural penetration of Australia by outside interests, I even have some comforting news on that front too. I am on the Australian Committee of the Italian based Cassamarca Foundation, which has the aim of saving Latin Humanism in the world, Latin humanism remaining vaguely undefined. In the meantime, if we are not too sure what Latin humanism is, the Foundation has agreed to fund eleven lectureships in Italian studies in Australian universities for three years—in the first instance. Our University has been awarded two of the eleven lectureships, one to the Italian Department and one to the History Department. The Cassamarca Foundation may also be interested in setting up and funding an Australian Foundation for Italian Studies. The Cassamarca Foundation is global capital, its mission is Italian—or rather Veneto—cultural imperialism, but I am not complaining. With more of this Renaissance type patronage across the humanities, our future would be assured.

By no means all the practitioners and proponents of the humanities live in the academy and indeed some of the most trenchant critics of humanities faculties are independent scholars, arts and literary journalists. But I do want to focus this evening on the future of humanities in the universities, and particularly in our own. I do so with some trepidation since I now belong to the group recently described as ‘those deputy and pro-whatevers ... who have grown luxuriant in the soil of the new reforms, have themselves adopted the philistine stance as part of their self-understanding and as integral to the making of a successful career’.¹ I believe that the humanities are still strong at this University. We still have a comparatively large staffing establishment and a broad and diverse curriculum and we still attract a comparatively large number of students from a very diverse range of age, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.

I have no doubt that the humanities will survive, but that survival cannot be taken for granted. It has to be fought for. And survival does not necessarily mean that we will always be as large and diverse as we are now, nor that we should be. We will survive but

we certainly will not be the same. The Faculty of Arts of course knows this and is now beginning to adapt and change to ensure not only survival but also renaissance. Significant acts to position the Faculty well for the future are the new awards that come on board next year, including Media and Communications and Informatics. The important statement in our Media and Communication award is that it is well grounded in the rigour of the older disciplines as well as embracing the newer disciplines. We have taken Media Studies on board because the demand is enormous and because it is an area of increasing employment growth and of public importance. It is also an area where there is a very great need for informed and continuous criticism and for the injection of debate on values and ethics.

Academics of my generation and training have taken some time to adjust to the new humanities disciplines, media and communications and cultural studies; to accept that analysing Madonna is in the same intellectual league as analysing Machiavelli and Marx, even if the analysis of Madonna is in Machiavellian or Marxian terms. But then we need to remember that the humanities canon was not god given, did not come down with Moses from the mount. Rather it was created in time and has changed over time.

It was the Renaissance that created the classic and indeed classical humanities canon—grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. Language was of course classical languages, Latin and Greek, and literature was classical literature. The liberal education fashioned by the fifteenth-century Italian humanists remained the basis of the educational systems of Europe, and its diaspora, until the end of the nineteenth century. And, just as troglodytes like myself might secretly believe that western civilisation collapsed when cultural studies came into the academy, my own discipline of history, like English literature, only won its place in the last decade of the nineteenth century. There were men aplenty on academic boards and senates who fought fiercely against history's admission because they believed that history was subversive of morality, order and culture.

In Melbourne in 1912, that complex and pugnacious Warden

of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, Alexander Leeper, launched a campaign to save traditional liberal education from the forces of philistinism and the enemies of civilisation. The particular enemy was Melbourne University's Faculty of Arts, which had determined that Greek would no longer be a compulsory qualification for entry into the Faculty. For Leeper this decision was 'an educational calamity'. 'No country can afford to neglect the gospel of truth and beauty in life and art and literature that Greece has given to mankind'.² Compulsory Greek disappeared from Arts faculties across the empire to be followed at the end of World War II by compulsory Latin. The humanities survived, with the same goal of providing a liberal education.

We need to remember, then, that the disciplines that make up the humanities are not fixed, that they have come and gone and will go on doing so, that tomorrow's humanities will not necessarily be the same as today's humanities. It may well be that my sanguinity stems from my background in Italian Renaissance history, the time and place of the recovery of the corpus of classical Latin literature and the restoration of the Greek language and literature to the Western tradition. Knowledge of Greek had virtually disappeared from the Christian West for almost a millennium. When interest revived, Greek was recovered. What drops away for the moment may return. We need to remember, too, that the fifteenth-century humanists wrote off the middle ages as an age of barbarism because of poor Latin and no Greek. But that millennium made some not unimpressive intellectual advances in other areas of knowledge and culture.

Let me also hasten to add that I have the personal conviction that the teaching of Latin and Greek must be maintained at this University as well as the teaching of classical literature and history to those not versed in Latin and Greek. And I also believe that the preservation of the classics is not just the responsibility of the Faculty of Arts: it is a University wide responsibility.

If I return to Alexander Leeper having apoplexy about the abolition of compulsory Greek in Melbourne in 1912, he blamed the decline of the classics on the growth of applied science which

in fact 'means money, and often means money early in life'. There were :

people at large nowadays (dangerous people: they ought to be locked up) who positively think they are doing a service to mankind by preventing boys and girls from learning Greek and by turning them all onto technical and professional subjects at once.³

For 'applied science' today read business and commerce. Of course, Leeper's complaint was not new. A fifteenth-century educational treatise lamented that:

men are studying the sciences to make money and their master is avarice and the liberal arts in our times are not loved except as they lead on to the possession of other sciences,

and quoted the following ditty:

Arts thirsts, the Decretals are fat,
The law itself is proud, Moses plays the pontiff,
Medicine sneaks in the chamber door.

Again, from time immemorial, the debate has raged between liberal and professional education but, in fact, much of liberal education has been professional education, often education for new professions. Proponents of the humanities have won their place in the sun in most times and most places by demonstrating to powers the utility of liberal education. The *studia humanitas*, the humanities, triumphed in fifteenth-century Italy because the humanists were able to demonstrate the utility of their disciplines to rulers and ruling classes, to persuade them that the humanities were the best education for princes and civil servants, the best preparation for the art of government, and for active citizenship. Latin and Greek remained dominant in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elite education because rulers and ruling classes continued to believe that this was the best preparation for governing kingdoms and republics, empires and colonies. Classical, liberal education trained civil servants, clergy, and teachers.

With the development of the modern and modernising nation state, as Bill Readings has recently argued in his book, *The University in Ruins*, the university took on the task of producing

citizens or subjects who would constitute the rational civil society.⁴ Or as Ian Hunter put in an article in *Meanjin* at the end of the 1980s, education in the humanities was designed to transmit to students the ethical, legal and technical competences and cultural abilities required for lives as citizens.⁵ And we should remember that the majority of students who studied the humanities until very recent times became teachers.

The ethical competencies and cultural abilities for success in modern society may not be the appropriate ones for postmodern society. For the past hundred years we have prepared students for positions and careers. It is now widely predicted the days of careers are over for most people. Most of our students will not have careers but will be self-employed with portfolios of competencies and experiences. They will work by contracting their skills and services for shorter or longer periods. We may need to encourage different values and competencies—flexibility, adaptability, self responsibility—and perhaps we will need to curb rampant individualism. In the words of one commentator, we have to develop in graduates a mentality that is ironic, intuitive and instantaneous.⁶

I have spent most of my time in this talk on the future of the humanities reflecting on the past. But you must expect this when you ask historians, whose great gift is hindsight, to talk about the future. One of the consolations of history is that it confers the long-term view, frees us from enslavement to the present.

The contents of the box called humanities were different in the past and will be different in the future. If you agree with Alexander Leeper, we are engaged in defending a civilisation which has already been destroyed. My reading of history—and mine is not everyone's—leads me to the belief that while the defence of the humanities can be made on intrinsic and extrinsic grounds, the humanities have to live in their presents, adjust and adapt to those presents, reach out and demonstrate their utility to their societies.

This means that we have to bend a little to current winds, to construct degrees, educate students to meet the labour demands of the emerging societies. And once, as I believe will now happen, students and their families pay for a considerable part of their

education, incurring heavy debts, the pressure on us to demonstrate that our education leads to commensurate future remuneration will be all the greater. To secure funding some of us will have to engage in research and teaching projects that will be moulded by what a particular profession, government agency, private industry, welfare agency, or museum wants. But some of us should also be smart enough to persuade these bodies that they need what we want to do. I would also hope that the principles of socialisation of wealth across the University will still apply so that out of our profits we will fund the lone gifted scholars speculating on a long shot with no obvious immediate gain to anyone.

Equally important, we have to persuade, and this means actively persuade, society of its need for the particular skills, mental habits and outlooks that education in the humanities provides. We have to do this, I believe, not only to preserve the future of the humanities but also to ensure the creation of the just humane society. North American Humanities Dean, Annette Kolodny, has recently written that we cannot train our graduate students for their roles as teachers and researchers and ignore their responsibilities as citizens in a community.⁷ We cannot ignore that role ourselves. And perhaps we have to forego some of our modish extreme relativism and affirm again that, while recognising that knowledge and values are the creation of power and that there are many ways of constructing the world, some ways are unacceptable and wrong, some values are universal.

Because of the speed of change in the present, because of the enormous challenges we are about to face to our fast declining monopoly of higher education—from globalisation, from infotainment, from the democratisation of knowledge, from mass higher education, from the capacities and capabilities of information technology—we need structures and processes that allow us to move quickly. The borders between departments and disciplines have to become more porous so we can move as part of inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary teams in problem based teaching and research. It is doubtful if the future needs of students and of employers or even of society will fall into neat disciplinary compartments. It is for this reason that I applaud the courage of

the Arts Faculty in embracing its restructuring, and doing so in the full realisation and open discussion of what may be lost as well as gained. We also need to think beyond the faculty, to imagine and plan how we could put our units into other awards, infiltrate our ideas and disciplines into other kingdoms.

In our propaganda, we stress the advantages that students gain from education in humanities: critical and analytical abilities, an understanding of complex relationships, communication skills. We argue that education in the humanities stretches the imagination, allows us to experience other ways of thinking, living, loving, frees us from thralldom to the present, from dogma, encourages tolerance. We had better believe this, demonstrate that we can do it, because life in the multicultural knowledge society of continuous change is going to need our kind of education. And we had better hone our skills of communication. As Janet McCalman has recently written, the humanities are the most democratic of scholarly pursuits, open to all who can read with fluency and listen with understanding; the humanities are unique among learned disciplines because of their openness to the lay person.⁸ If we are to survive we must remain democratic and open. And we should also remember the words of the old Duke in Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel, *The Leopard*, when the Risorgimento arrived in Sicily: if we want things to remain the same, we must change.

Notes

- 1 Tony Coady, 'A Defence of Liberal Knowledge', *Knowing Ourselves and Others. The Humanities in Australia in the 21st Century*, Australian Academy of Humanities, Canberra, 1998, vol.3, p.23.
- 2 John Poynter, *Doubts and Certainties. A Life of Alexander Leeper*, Melbourne, 1997, p.358.
- 3 Poynter, p.357.
- 4 Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, Cambridge, Mass., 1996.
- 5 Ian Hunter, 'Accounting for the Humanities', *Meanjin* 48.3 (1989): 445.
- 6 Peter Scott, 'The Postmodern University?', *The Postmodern University? Contested Visions of Higher Education in Society*, ed. Anthony Smith and Frank Webster, The Society for Research into Higher Education, 1997, p.45.

- 7 Annette Kolodny, *Failing the Future. A Dean Looks at Higher Education in the Twenty-First Century*, Durham, N.C., 1998, pp.33–52.
- 8 Janet McCalman, 'Community Interaction: The Humanities and the Community', *Knowing Ourselves and Others*, vol.3, p.59.