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An Adult Education Tragedy

C. R. Badger

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On a bleak early winter Melbourne morning, the second of June 1975 at 9.50, I attended the funeral of the late John Alexander Gunn, M.A., B.Sc., Ph.D., Director of Extension in the University of Melbourne 1923-193S, philosopher, psychologist, economist, author. He died on May 29 at Farnham Court Home for old people, St. Kilda. We were a very small company at the funeral in the big chapel: four mourners, one funeral parlour attendant and a chaplain. The principal mourner was one of the administrators of the home where Gunn lived for five or six years before his death. He was accompanied by two rather decrepit old men from the same institution who might have come from Trollope's *Hiram's Hospital*. They seemed slightly bewildered since they did not know Gunn and had been brought along only to make up some kind of congregation. Gunn had no relatives and no friends. The chaplain had been badly briefed; he knew nothing whatever about "the deceased", as he kept on calling the unheeding corpse, and not even once did he get his name right. It was "John Alexander" he prayed for and committed to the flames and never John Alexander Gunn.

The administrator told me after the ceremony that the University of Melbourne had paid for the funeral; otherwise it must have been a totally unremarked interment for poor Gunn who was penniless. 1 felt rather better to think that we were giving him a respectable send-off but I wished that there had been just a few more people present and some who knew and remembered Gunn and who perhaps thought of him with kindness. But there was no one except those mentioned and I thought I had really no right to be there since 1 scarcely knew him. I simply succeeded him as Director of Extension in 1939, after he had been virtually dismissed from the University in 1938.

Gunn's name, I suppose, is quite unknown in adult education circles today and the tragic story of his life in Melbourne is preserved only in part in an unpublished thesis by Alfred Wesson. The one slight memorial to him which I know is on a large office desk in the C.A.E. in Melbourne which has on it several small plaques which read: "Meredith Atkinson slept here"; "J. Alexander Gunn slept here"; "C. R. Badger slept here". The desk came from the University of Melbourne and was used in turn by the three Directors of Extension at that University. It passed to the C.A.E. when the Extension Board was wound up in 1947. It is curious to reflect that these three

men, two of them very able and academically distinguished, found the difficulties of the Extension job insuperable. Meredith Atkinson resigned under something of a cloud, J. A. Gunn was dismissed and I resigned. I was more fortunate than the others in that whereas their post-university lives were very miserable, I found a challenging and satisfying career as the Victorian Director of Adult Education.

John Alexander Gunn was born in Liverpool on April 2, 1896, the son of James Gunn of Caithness, Scotland. He was educated at Oulton School, Liverpool, and proceeded by scholarship to the University of Liverpool where he read for the Honours degree in classical literature and philosophy. His academic career was interrupted by the 1914-18 war. He enlisted in 1916 and saw service with the French army, returning to Liverpool after discharge in 1918 to take a brilliant first in classical history and philosophy with several prizes and distinctions.

In 1921 he was appointed tutor in philosophy and undertook extension and tutorial class work for the University. He spent a year at the Sorbonne as a research scholar; his first book, the result of his work there and his Ph.D. thesis: *Bergson and his Philosophy*, was published in 1920, followed by *Modern French Philosophy* in 1922. Late in 1922 two positions were available to him. He was offered the chair of philosophy at Witwatersrand University, Johannesburg, South Africa, and at the same time, largely through the good offices of A. L. Smith, Master of Balliol and well-known supporter of the W.E.A., the post of Director of Extension at the University of Melbourne. This position carried a salary of .£1,000 p.a., the rank and title of professor of the University and a seat on the professorial board. Gunn elected to come to Melbourne and took up his position as Director in March 1923. Some of his best academic work was done after he came to Melbourne for he published a book on Spinoza in 1925 and his important work *The Problem of Time*, in 1924. He wrote articles for the philosophical journal *The Monist* as well as for the *Australian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy*. He was a good and lucid lecturer, an excellent linguist and earned the respect of many distinguished men for his scholarship.

I find it impossible to imagine what Gunn was like when he first came to Melbourne. When I met him in 1939 he was a broken man soured by failure, suffering from a sense of having been very badly treated. His personal appearance was not prepossessing. He was a small man, thin, wiry, active and aggressive. My impression of him was most unfavourable since, as soon as we met, he poured out to me all his pent-up hatred and bitterness about the University and especially about the W.E.A. I found it difficult to follow his tirade, impossible to stop it, and while I felt extremely sorry for him, I took good care to avoid him in future. He was much disliked at the University; some of his colleagues found him prickly, selfassertive, opinionated and incompetent.

There was, however, very clearly another side to him. Rudolf Bronner, his assistant director, worked happily with him and gave him consistent support. His secretary, Norah Strahan, who became my secretary in 1939, regarded him highly and she was a woman of fine character and sound judgment. For many years he acted as Recorder to the Melbourne Beefsteak Club, a dining and discussion club for medical, legal and university people, a little like the Boobooks Club. One or two W.E.A. people thought well of him and admired his lectures and his brilliance but they were very much a minority.

An odd facet of his character and one that made for trouble was his inability to manage his personal affairs. In spite of his professorial salary, Gunn was almost always financially embarrassed. He had no obvious vices, did not gamble, was no drunkard, lived very modestly in a rented flat and was childless. Yet he was constantly obliged to push his claims for a few pounds here and a few pounds there and made very bad friends by borrowing money and then failing to pay his debts. He was even forced by his needs to borrow money from his secretary, Norah Strahan, and from L. T. Leathley, his one real friend in the W.E.A.

The tragic flaw in his character and that which led to his downfall, I suppose, was his intellectual arrogance. Gunn was and knew himself to be a very able man. Perhaps as a consequence he tended to despise those who lacked his special gifts of rapid assimilation of fact and his powers of deductive reasoning. He thought that his brilliance demanded and should naturally command a corresponding obeisance from lesser intelligences; that it was for him to call the tune and for others to dance it. He met university colleagues in Melbourne who denied his claims to intellectual superiority and who held positions of greater authority and prestige than his own. He also met inferiors who were blankly unaware of his abilities. As A. G. Dickens has observed of another, “His was the tragedy of the doctrinaire called to practical leadership, yet lacking that instinct toward human beings, that sense of the practical in a real world, which have always proved more useful than high principles and strict logic based on narrow premises.” (The English Reformation, p. 385.)

Gunn's character apart, all the cards were stacked against him well before he came to Melbourne and he would have needed great wisdom, personal powers of persuasion, an instinct for making correct assessments and decisions, to have succeeded. Most of these attributes he lacked and a road to ruin had been effectively laid out for him by his predecessor, Meredith Atkinson, the first Director of Tutorial Classes in the University of Sydney and Director in Melbourne 1918-1922. Atkinson had left Sydney after many troubles because the University refused to give him a professorship. Melbourne, largely at the urging of Sir James Barrett, founder and

perpetual patron of the W.E.A., was eager to have him on any terms and he was invited to accept the directorship. His letter accepting the offer came from Hobart where he was staying with the secretary of the W.E.A. in Tasmania, S. D. Thompson. Among his first actions in Melbourne was to arrange for Thompson's appointment as secretary of the "Victorian W.E.A. at a salary of .£260 p.a. paid by the University. Nobody asked why Atkinson, an officer of the University, busied himself about appointing a secretary for a voluntary association whose internal arrangements were no business of his or of the University. Nor were any questions asked about the propriety of the appointment while the honorary secretary of the association, L. T. Leathley, was on active service abroad.

When Atkinson arrived in Melbourne, he was responsible for the operation of both the University Extension Board, founded in 1891, and the Joint Committee for Tutorial Classes (1914). The University Council had laid down quite firmly in 1913 "that any organisation outside the University could ask for what were known as tutorial classes and assist in managing them with a joint committee with the Extension Board". Within the first year of that decision, there was only one joint committee for tutorial classes, that with the W.E.A. By 1921, thanks to Atkinson's stupidity, the W.E.A. members had come to dominate the Extension Board itself. Arguing that the continuation of the Extension Board and the Joint Committee for Tutorial Classes was "costly and cumbersome", Atkinson brought about an amalgamation of the two in a new statute which provided for a Board of twenty-two, eleven from the W.E.A., two from the University Council, six from the full-time teaching staff of the University nominated by the Professorial Board, and three appointed by the University Council after consultation with the Board itself i.e. virtually co-opted members. The chairman was the Director; the secretary was the secretary of the W.E.A.

By this piece of folly the University lost control over its Extension work and gave the W.E.A. a privileged place which it was quick to exploit and zealous to defend. The academic members of the Board rarely attended; the W.E.A. members were always present. The co-option power added to the W.E.A. strength. The chairman was in no position to defend or impose any policy not sanctioned by the W.E.A. which had not only control of the executive machinery in the hands of the secretary but had as well a network of friends and supporters in the University itself. It had, especially, the support and encouragement of Sir James Barrett and of Sir Harrison Moore, the influential professor of law.

It is ironical and tragic that this situation should have come about just when any candid and objective survey of the facts would have suggested that it was time to write off the W.E.A. experiment as a failure and to think again about an adult

education policy suited to the needs of Victoria. By 1921 the classes organised by the W.E.A. had ceased in any way to resemble the rigorous three year courses demanded by theory. The W.E.A. had lost any contact with or support it had ever had from the organised working class movement. In 1917 the Victorian Labor College was founded; in 1922 the Trades Hall Council withdrew its support from the W.E.A. Commonsense demanded that the W.E.A. should therefore be wound up and give place to a more effective organisation. It was an experiment which had failed. Commonsense, of course, was not heard. Instead, Atkinson faded from the scene, his early popularity in Melbourne tarnished by scandal in 1921. In 1922 he resigned, leaving his assistant, Rudolf Bronner, to carry on in his uneasy chair until Gunn arrived in March 1923.

It was the institutional muddle created by Atkinson which led to an almost immediate and hostile confrontation between J. A. Gunn and S. D. Thompson, to an intolerable series of petty quarrels between the Extension Director and the W.E.A., to a personal feud between the two men, and to Gunn's ruin. I do not believe that temperamental differences between the two men were the major cause of the trouble; given the circumstances, their quarrel was inevitable.

Gunn recognised quite clearly what Atkinson had failed to see: that the W.E.A., without any base in the working-class movement, without support from the Trades Hall, and having abandoned any pretence of organising three year tutorial classes had become parasitic on the University. He wanted the Extension Board to take its own independent line in adult education, leaving the W.E.A. to do whatever it liked but forbidding it any claim to interfere in Extension policy. He showed considerable energy and skill in the kinds of schemes he developed for Extension — vacation schools, University "week", correspondence courses, public lectures. His proposals were doggedly opposed by the W.E.A. representatives on the Board and since those which were accepted could only be implemented by Thompson they were not spectacularly successful. The W.E.A. wanted nothing but evening classes in which they had a vested interest; Gunn had far wider plans and visions.

The lines of battle were drawn within a few months of Gunn's arrival. The W.E.A., and especially its secretary, recognised that if Gunn got his way and made an effective Extension programme independent of the W.E.A., their day of power and influence was over. Equally Gunn recognised that if he failed to assert his independence he would be a permanent captive. Having discovered just how unworkable the system devised by Atkinson was, he determined to alter it. He presented a report to the University Council in July 1924, ignoring the Extension Board, and asked for reform. This was to consist in the setting up of special machinery to deal with tutorial classes and a new kind of Extension Board, predominently University but with two representatives from the Education

Department and two from the W.E.A. Gunn coupled these entirely sensible proposals with a scathing attack on Thompson. “It must be said that the existing constitution has never had a fair trial owing to the attitude of the secretary which is one of declared hostility to the University, lack of straightforward dealing and of definite disloyalty to the fundamental principles of the work. If the present constitution, or indeed any constitution is to work at all, attention must be directed to the personal qualifications of the secretary. If adult education under the University or under the W.E.A. is to make any progress in Victoria, the present secretary’s tenure of office must end at once, i.e. with the expiry of tenure on August 1."

As far as I can ascertain, the University Council ignored this report and it seems never to have come before it. Instead, the bombshell exploded at a meeting of the Extension Board held on July 28, 1924. This meeting decided to set up a committee of enquiry and invited Mr. Justice Schutt, a judge of the Supreme Court, to act as chairman to ensure impartiality. Almost every other member was sympathetic towards Thompson. By a tactical masterstroke, E. J. Ingram, one of Gunn’s most implacable opponents, moved that the enquiry should be concerned with the charges against Thompson, with the administration of the Board and tutorial classes, with the duties of the Assistant Director and such matters. Gunn’s proposal for reform were excluded and were never discussed. With such a committee and with such terms of reference, the finding of the enquiry was predictable. Charges made by Gunn against Thompson were held to be groundless. Gunn, himself, and his Assistant came in for a good deal of criticism. The principal recommendation was that there should be more frequent consultation and fuller co-operation between the Director and the W.E.A. officials. Gunn was made to unsay his charges against Thompson; his plan for reform of the Board was ignored. The W.E.A. victory was complete. Gunn’s self-confidence was badly shaken and he drew back from any further immediate attempt to reform the Board and to put the W.E.A. in its place.

In my opinion Gunn should never have accepted the findings of the enquiry committee which were, in effect, a vote of censure on him pronounced by a far-from-impartial tribunal. He should immediately have tendered his resignation to the University or made it a condition of continuing as Director of Extension that his proposed reforms should be adopted. In the circumstances, had the matter come in this way directly before the University Council, I doubt if his resignation could have been accepted. Even if it had, he was young, highly qualified and the world was wide. Accepting such a humiliating defeat at the hands of his enemies in the W.E.A. condemned him to fifteen years of failure and finally collapse.

My sympathies in the case at this time lie wholly with Gunn, but I do not, for all that, see Thompson as the villain of the piece. Blame and responsibility really

belong to the University which, by accepting Atkinson's foolish proposals, placed Gunn in an impossible position and then refused to extricate him from the muddle by ignoring his sensible proposals for reform. He was appointed to a job and refused the means to execute it — and then was blamed for his lack of success. The University authorities thereafter averted their eyes from the real problem and talked about a clash of personalities.

From 1924 onwards there was certainly a clash of personalities, not only between Gunn and Thompson, who were bitter enemies, but between Gunn and the leading figures of the W.E.A. University opinion on the whole leaned to Thompson's side for he was a very mild, inoffensive, smooth man, very deferential to all university professors. Gunn's account of him as a villainous schemer was not widely credited. He, himself, was truculent and off-handed, becoming more and more tiresome as he brooded over his grievances and as the bitterness of unjust treatment burnt within him. He might well have said with the Psalmist, "Woe is me that I am constrained to dwell with Mesech and to have my habitation among the tents of Kedar ... I labour for peace but when I speak unto them thereof they make them ready for battle."

In 1927 there seemed to be at least a chance that reform along the lines urged by Gunn might be undertaken. The W.E.A. majority on the Extension Board asked the University Council to abolish the post of Assistant Director and to end Rudolf Bronner's appointment on February 28, 1927. This would have meant that Gunn thereupon became totally dependent on Thompson for all organising work. The request was made on the plea of economy and went to the University Council on December 6, 1926. For once the Council took a strong line, refusing to act without full enquiry. It set up its own committee headed by the Chancellor and placed on it some of the most able and clear-sighted members of the Council. The result was an excellent report which went over the whole ground and proposed reforms in the Extension statute. The committee was by no means impressed by the W.E.A., pointing out that its alleged large membership was artificially swollen and that it really had at the utmost a membership of fifty. It remarked on the unwisdom of allowing any University Board to be dominated by non-university members and upheld strongly the importance of Extension as a university function and the need for it to function independently.

Most of the reforms proposed by the enquiry committee were embodied in the 1927 statute. The new Extension Board consisted of the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and Director of University Extension, together with fifteen others appointed by the Council. Eight, of whom six would be members of the teaching staff, were to represent the University, four (the committee proposed three) were to be from the

W.E.A.; two were to be nominated by the Trades Hall Council and one co-opted member only was allowed. The Board was to elect its own chairman and the secretary was to be the Registrar of the University and no longer the secretary of the W.E.A. The board was empowered to appoint an executive (only one member from the W.E.A.) and a tutorial classes committee with a predominencc of university members. On paper that statute was excellent and embodied almost all that Gunn had wanted in 1924. It came into force in 1928.

There was, however, one catch. The committee finally agreed to abolish the post of Assistant Director but thought that another officer, an organising tutor, should be appointed. Bronner left the University in 1927 but, since times were hard, was not replaced. Gunn was then still wholly dependent on Thompson who, though no longer secretary of the Board, was the only official who could execute the Board's policy, apart from Gunn himself. It was soon apparent that though the W.E.A. members were no longer in the majority, they had great influence, for it was hard to get university members to attend and not all, in any case, supported Gunn. Reform had come too late and the endemic bitterness of Director and W.E.A. Secretary made even good machinery unworkable.

Subsequent years were full of trouble and the University Council and University staff became more and more impatient. It seemed that no amount of tinkering could improve matters. In 1935 following further representations to the Council by Gunn, Sir Raymond Priestly, the new Vice-Chancellor, set up an enquiry committee of which he became chairman. It reported to the Council in 1937 and its recommendations, immediately accepted by the Council, put an end to Gunn's university career. The principal recommendation was that, at the end of his current five year term, the Extension post should be advertised. A new salary of £750 p.a. was agreed upon and the new Director was not to be styled professor nor to have a seat on the professorial board. Applications under these terms were called in 1938 and I was appointed as Director and took up my post in March 1939. It is strange that, though Gunn was virtually dismissed, university opinion by 1938 had swung heavily against the W.E.A. The candidate it most favoured for the position and for whom it lobbied strenuously, received only two votes in the Council ballot whereas I, who was strongly opposed by the W.E.A., gained all the rest.

Gunn was given some part-time lecturing in psychology but he did this so perfunctorily that the new Chancellor, John Medley, was soon forced to reprimand and finally to dismiss him. He had lost all contact with the University by the end of 1939 and never succeeded in obtaining any academic work elsewhere. On the few occasions I saw him after that time he looked a shabby, seedy, pitiful wreck. When his wife, who worked to support him after he left the University, died, he seems to

have been reduced to real poverty and to isolation and intellectual darkness. I have seen a little of what he wrote at about this time and it touches the heart with pity for the man who had written so much and so well in better days.

His story has a moral but I do not want to draw it. At one time in my life, in 1946, when I faced the fact of failure in my own work as Director of Extension in Melbourne and tendered my resignation, the tragic figure of J. Alexander Gunn was much in my mind. He haunted me for many years. I am glad his unquiet spirit rests. *Vale*.