Permanent decline and fall or imaginable resurrection? The fate of History at UWA as viewed from the edge of retirement

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In August 2009 I had a magical moment as I drifted towards retirement in 2011 from what I still think of as the History Department of the University of Western Australia. The ‘History Discipline Group’ still sounds too much like a brothel to me. Quite out of the blue, I received an email from a student whom I had taught in First Year in 1987, the year that I arrived at UWA. I had not been in contact with this man since then and, it seemed, that he had built a flourishing career as a lawyer, as well as developed a major social and intellectual interest in Argentina. He wrote to say:

‘I was one of your History 102 students in 1987, and I want to thank you for the positive influence you’ve had on my life. … At the end of 1987, I was lost to the wastelands of Law School (although it is perhaps a tad ironic that if I hadn’t got an A for History 102, I might not have got in). You told me that year that your course was a good preparation for Law, and you were right. I do a lot of work now for clients with decision making disabilities, including when members of their families are accused of exploiting them. Whenever I read reports on that, I don’t instantly assume it’s an account of “what actually happened”, but, subconsciously at least, I ask: “Who wrote this? When? Why?”. That approach helps me to assist a lot of vulnerable people. I also think I owe my determination to understand a different language and culture partly to you. I can now speak Spanish quite well: not fluently yet, but better than almost anyone I’ve met who didn’t grow up with it. I’m good at gossiping and arguing, which are not bad skills when travelling in South America. It’s enriched my life in lots of ways. The book that I am just about to read is by Junot Díaz and contains a fair bit of castellano. Finally (and I hope that this e-mail is some proof of this), you played a huge role in teaching me to write well. I remember the difference between my first and last assignments in History 102. They looked like they’d been written six years – not six months – apart. Thank you for everything.’

I record his words not, I hope, to boast but rather to remember my wonderful two decades from 1978 at the University of Sydney and then at UWA until my quadruple cardiac by-pass in 1999. This was the time when my prime self-definition was that I was a teacher of First Years. Thereafter, my fate has been to enter an extraordinary second life in which whatever had previously been my international reputation was vastly enhanced. By 2009 I have watched astonished while my two Mussolini books, a biography (2002, new revised edition due 2010) and study of life under the dictatorship (2005), won five of Australia’s numerous, doubtless too numerous, historical prizes and were short-listed for five others, as well as being widely distributed in their Italian translations. Each in total has sold tens of thousands of copies. I have written a little polemic about nationalism (2007)

and edited a vast collection of essays brought together as the *Oxford handbook on fascism* (2009). In the last fortnight, I have even finished what has been the most difficult of all my authorial engagements, a book called *Modern Rome and its histories*, which, somewhere deep in its prose, endeavours to contest the Australian assumption, both on left and right, that ‘our’ history is afflicted by a binary ‘war’. *Modern Rome* carries my total of published words in the decade past one million, two million, if translated words are added. Of this tally, 5375 words were published in Australia, the rest abroad. Appropriately therefore, I have acquired a splendid London agent, who nudges me towards further studies. I have grown used to invitations from Michigan, Paris, Göttingen, Trieste, Pavia, Rome, Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin and the rest to give major lectures or participate in round-tables trying to sum up the meaning of fascism. Both Cambridge and Oxford University presses now regard me as one of the leading experts on Italian or other European history and so I sit on their advisory boards or regularly review MSS submitted by colleagues across the world to them. Whereas, as will be noted further below, many of my colleagues who focus on national Australian history make do in the national sheltered workshop, I certainly do not but rather, while pinching myself in disbelief, inhabit a strangely sunlit upland of the Great World.

Similarly, from 2007 until my retirement at the end of 2011, I have negotiated an arrangement whereby I spend half the year at UWA and the rest at Reading in the UK where I can enjoy a special centre of Italian studies, valued colleagues and a fine library in my most immediate field. I am writing this essay in November 2009, therefore in my Australian months. I have to confess that I find my returns to Australia vexing, all the more when I try to integrate the present into my memories of the First Year Teacher and so of my version of my past. One major problem is the country’s ‘howardisation’ which two years of cautious Labor government have done little to amend. BBC radio is a joy and an intellectual stimulation. ABC radio is a parody, by contrast, dominated by a dread mixture of sport, obsessive reading of tea-leaves about whether equities will, in the next hour, go up or down, and a commitment to ‘balance’. This last is a term which actually means equal time or more for neo-cons and their thoughtless ‘think tanks’, despite the fact that such people compose a small faction of democratic commentary and analysis and, if they had any self-awareness or honour, with the demise of George W. Bush and his disastrous regime in the US, now ought to be quieter than in the recent past. No wonder I think sourly of present-day Australia as ‘Dakota’, an extraordinarily rich and privileged territory becoming dumber by the day.

Nowhere is this discounting and destruction of critical intelligence more evident that in the fate of undergraduate teaching at least at the university that I know best and which I (critically) love. It is time to return to Late Modern European History (LME) I and contemplate what has happened to undergraduate teaching since the 1990s. My course was a joy to me, and, despite engaging in versions of it on a dozen occasions (with friendly colleagues), I never ceased to be its eager student and was always tinkering with its nature in search of improvement. Presumably the same was true for many of the other Arts courses then taught by my colleagues. Certainly LME I had three characteristics that might help to explain that email from a student of it thirty years later. It had time. It had rigour.
It ran generously across a full academic year from February to November, always seeking to occupy the vacational periods as well as those of formal term or semester. It was therefore 36 weeks long, not counting the exam period. Its tutorial system tried, often it seemed to me successfully, to persuade students to argue about its themes and problems not just in class but at midnight, over coffee or wine, while they were making love. This ample expanse of time had the other positive of allowing space for repetition. As a teacher I hammered away at the bases of the course — notably, as my email correspondent noted, the claim that all sources needed to be asked on initial intellectual meeting who? When? And why? These simple questions were, and are, the beginning of critical scepticism (and democracy). Thanks to repetition, students who did not get their import in March could have the penny drop for them in October (or even years later).

If the time given to the course was, as shall be seen, far greater than is now possible, LME I also had span. It covered all of Europe, including Australia as an honorary European country of a kind, from the French and Industrial revolutions and Enlightenment to the present. Since every fortnight we dealt in detail with a celebrated (and controversial) historian, as well as in the tutorials of the other weeks reviewing a gamut of primary sources from memoir to film to novel, I could also prompt first years into commencing a lifetime interest in intellectual endeavour of many kinds. Together we watched and critiqued movies with sub-titles. Not for nothing was one of the supernumerary course handouts a list of ‘novels to read before you die’.

Finally, and most important, LME I had rigour. I simply assumed that students would read whole books and do so often and regularly. I enjoyed repeating to them the remark made to me when a student at Sydney University by the visiting professor from Yale, Robin W. Winks, that not a day passed without him reading at least two books. His patronising addition was that he would expect us to read one. I knew of course that my own students were of varied motivation and ability, and that quite a few would read not so much. But, to me, the key was not to admit this limitation, never to talk down to First Years, always to encourage them to be bold and so ‘excel themselves’. Indeed that was the point of teaching First Years. They came to university excited and proud to be there. In some other courses or departments, I knew that colleagues preferred to baby them and, for example, were much given to telling them the answers. Since I never knew myself what the ultimate answers were to LME I’s grand questions about the Holocaust, the nation and the gulag, my job was to reiterate and heighten the questions. Crucially, I could guide my students into realising that the best place for discussion was not with me nor in formal class but outside, during those vast unoccupied hours of late teenage life when they could talk and argue, talk and argue some more with their fellows, and so actually experience what universities, at their best, have always meant to be. They could be bitten by the bug of intellectual companionship (and rivalry). They could become a cohort. They could also learn to escape the drably wealthy materialism of the suburbs, blot out the inanity of footy and the rest of the sporting life, and even realise that ‘reading The West Australian is an oxymoron.

If First Year was one special place, there was another in my teaching life. It was Honours,
after all where in Second Year at Sydney in 1962 I had met my lifetime companion, Michal, while we both sat at the feet of the ‘reffo’ Ernest Bramsted, indeed the ‘history of the great world speaking’ and no limply parochial resident of a sheltered workshop. At UWA, honours only started in third year but it did exist then, as well as in the final fourth year when the university teaching of history, at least in my understanding, reached its logical conclusion. Once again, time, span and rigour then dominated honours courses in a fashion that is no longer possible. Seminars ran throughout the year. Vacations were occupied with extra work. Courses ranged widely or used microcosms (to illuminate macrocosms) according to taste. But, by the end of the honours year, students had discussed an ample array of what currently concerned the history discipline. Many, in any case, were lawyers-in-the-making, who, after their honours year, retreated to their chosen profession, but did so illuminated by a close study of a humanity. They were therefore all the more likely to be and to remain humane.

Alas for this past and my sometime petty ambitions. Where are they now with Ninevah and Tyre? True, to some extent I can solace myself at Reading, teaching a final year seminar on the historicisation of the Second World Wars which still intrigues and arouses students and sends them off with many questions left to probe. At Reading, I can still set whole books, and that is what all my colleagues there do. Three years of experience of this middle ranking university have also made me a deep admirer of the seriousness of the British system of external assessment. Prima facie, Reading students are unlikely to be their country’s best. Yet, we do produce Firsts and they deserve the honour. Again my bifurcated experience, if doubtless subjective, has left me discountenanced by our own slap-happy marking system (it always was such) at UWA, as well as making me sadly aware of mark inflation in Australia. I am as sure as I can be that lower Firsts at UWA would only be reckoned II/i standard at Reading. The external assessors would ensure it.

But it is not the relative survival of the humanities in England that is the focus of this paper (and the GFC is anyway of inevitable menace to the Arts, even there). Rather it is the humanities’ fate at UWA that I want to review. Here, at whatever level, from the start of the academic experience to its end, what has happened over the last decade or so is the decline and fall of time, span and rigour. Courses have multiplied in number and, as a result, have become shorter and shorter, quite a few now beginning and ending in 10 weeks. The vacation is just that, a period empty of intellectual work, presumably filled instead with pleasures of drink, sex and footy (if this last is really possible). Reading expectations are minimal, often no more than a ‘course reader’ or even a website of a hundred pages or less of already homogenised and pasteurised material, pre-digested by the teacher. Courses inevitably privilege answers and not questions. When next some university pronouncement hits your desk about teaching progress and productivity, read it in the knowledge that what used to be 36 weeks of teaching is now as low as 20 and contemplate the loss of thinking time that has resulted. In reality, the situation is worse still, since the automatic recording of lectures for the web means students do not actually have to attend the campus, and, here as elsewhere in our contemporary ‘world of business’, there are voices suggesting that the best teaching can occur virtually and while students are in paid employment. Think of the money that could be saved by selling off the UWA campus site beside the Swan for elite housing!
This withering away of rigorous expectations is all the more terrible to record since it has been accompanied by a propaganda barrage alleging the reverse, the double-speak of the Committee of Teaching and Learning (recently transmogrified to the still grander sounding Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning or CATL), of SPOT tests, and of the numerous, far too numerous, prizes, local and national, for teaching. The first responsibility for the destruction of what used to be a world-class undergraduate teaching system in the humanities has been borne by administrators, deans and deputy vice-chancellors of this and that, often themselves less than successful academics who, sadly, somehow lost their love for their original discipline and turned to administration as a replacement. Even when they have retained a genuine zest for the humanities, their concentration on endless committees and reports must take them away from the heavy demands of real, world-class, scholarship. It is impossible for them to read as a scholar must. They may be good at management but, by definition, they are second-rate at scholarship.

The administrators have taken the lead, if, no doubt less with free will (whatever they try to tell themselves about their ‘power’) and more ‘structured’ by obedience to Canberra and to all the hypocrisy and fakery of contemporary ‘quality control’. The administrators have imposed on the teaching academics the homogenisation of all courses, no matter what their intellectual purpose. They have demanded the short and the simple. If the learning by rote of some vocational detail in a course on accountancy or management or a language is ‘best practice’, then the same must be true of philosophy or history or literature or, indeed, the non-applied sciences, that is, of the intellectual heart of a real university whose prime purpose is not vocational but instead civilising. The administrators have eagerly assisted in creating an Australia which, for all I know, is quite good at middle management and is certainly very good at sport and at digging things out of the ground, but is increasingly deprived of a critical and lively high culture and so of a ‘humane’ ‘intellect’.

It is time to remember a world of ‘God professors’ (collapsed well before I acceded to the title). But my initial commandments to revive serious undergraduate work at UWA are therefore (i) end and reverse the policy that has equated one discipline with the next; (ii) end and reverse the policy that has equated one teaching unit with the next; (iii) restore the old undergraduate system which reduced the number of courses from 4 to 3 to 2 as a student moved from First Year to Third; (iv) restore at least the opportunity for full year courses and ensure that they are not ‘team taught’. ‘Team teaching’ is code for no individual academic taking responsibility for the intellectual frame and purpose of a course; (v) dissolve CATL and cancel the teaching prizes, distributing the saved funds to be used directly on undergraduate teaching.

A splendid testimony of our decline is the SPOT questionnaire, triumph of those dim proponents of pseudo-science whom Manning Clark, that quaint if occasionally oratorically lively historian, damned as ‘Measurers’. Nowadays, academics cannot rise from one level to the next without a quiver of favourable SPOT scores. Getting students to fill in the questionnaire favourably is the first art of academic survival in UWA today. Of
course, it is not so difficult. Students are nice people and they are also not very likely to be as tough and insightful in examining their teachers as they should be. Rather, as with the students’ own eventual honours scores, the marks tend upwards.

Yet SPOT tests always carry the danger that they will encourage teachers to be reticent in expressing their views, while also cautious in judging weak student performance or in making severe demands on student time and intellect. They encourage the soft option. They discourage ‘stretching’. They are also by definition short-term and foster short-termist teaching. Since they are usually themselves completed in the second last week of teaching, they imply that the course is then over, when, if it is addressed to a serious subject, it should just be beginning. Furthermore, all good teachers should hope to annoy and distress some of their class, perhaps for the moment, perhaps for ever. Annoyance and distress both imply that students’ minds are awake and challenged as they should be when undergraduates. Just as a book that is reviewed as ‘definitive’ is actually being consigned to a grave on a library shelf, and a 99.99% vote for a dictator in a dictatorship is not good evidence of his humanity and achievement, so, even of so primitive a form of measurement as the SPOT test, too elevated an academic’s score is actually a sign of failure or inadequacy.

My next commandment is therefore (vi) abolish the SPOT tests, perhaps replacing them with five, ten, fifteen … year afterwards reviews of what sometime students can still remember of their undergraduate experience. But then perhaps not, because such reviews would only encourage the appointment of fresh university bureaucrats and, before long, they would be colour coding the responses or indulging in some other curious and benighted habit of the ‘measuring’. Simpler and better would be to abolish the tests, sack all who administer them and return the saved funds to undergraduate teaching.

So far, I might seem to be writing a diatribe that blames everyone except the university teachers. Yet, we, too, carry heavy responsibility and nowadays live without protest in a culture which discounts undergraduate teaching (yet another example of dominating double-speak of present academic life, certainly at UWA and probably at all Australian universities). What really matters in the life of a young academic in our silver age? The answer is patent, a research grant. Those who win grants earn the university’s favour and a cushy life, which, if one grant is followed by another in a realm where grantspersonship is of great importance (more important, it always seems, than seriously measured ‘outcome’), then a ‘good researcher’, one whose work is of ‘national significance’, can be freed for ever from undergraduate teaching. Only the ‘failures’, the short-term appointments, the PhD students filling in at little notice, do that.

Here much fault lies with the ARC, although again the fundamental problem may be a bureaucratic mentality obsessed with ‘quality control’ and believing weakly and perniciously that the best way of measurement is ‘one size fits all’. It is true, nonetheless, that, of all subjects, History may have the deepest contradictions here. It is time for me to enlarge on my earlier asides about the ‘sheltered workshop’. The issue is that History, wherever it is practised, is intimately linked to the celebration and sellebration of the
nation. All nations proclaim their legitimacy, the unity or cohesion of their ‘people’, by ‘inventing traditions’ and using the past to forge identity and ‘imagine community’. But Australia is actually a new and immigrant country into which many different histories have flowed and are likely to flow further if we are to have a population of 35 million in 2050. It is also a country whose prime language is English, by definition a global and not a national tongue. English is the language of an international culture business that has its headquarters in London and New York. But historians of the Australian nation, whether from timidity or intellectual and stylistic limitation, only rarely cut it in such places. In her talk to the Academy of Humanities in November 2009, Ann Curthoys typically by implication defended this resistance to ‘internationalisation’ and preference for ‘protection’; indeed, she talked as though all historians in Australia do Australian history. No doubt some local historians do break free. But whereas Australian philosophers, Australian novelists and Australian film-makers all try to sell wherever the English language rules, Australian historians do not. Their work therefore remains unchallenged by competition of the sort expected in almost all other aspects of our current globalised lives. And they go on ignoring the ‘Rule of the History Channel’, as it might be called, and so the obvious fact that those who live in Australia actually consume by preference the pasts of the Renaissance, classical China, women on the American frontier or British imperialism in Africa with at least as much or greater enthusiasm than they do the derring-do of Eureka and Gallipoli.

Here the practice of the ARC has made matters much worse. There is the ludicrous 10% preference given to projects allegedly beneficial to the nation (plus a further 30% on equally dubious ‘national’ priorities). But any serious historian or other analyst of the nation knows that, in so far as all of the humanities are concerned, this matter cannot be judged in the short-term and, even in the long term, ought to be a matter of democratic debate and disagreement. My friends tell me that the ARC committees in practice recognise the absurdity, and so do not ‘really’ give the full reward to ‘nation-assisting’ applications. But, if true, that secret policy makes the situation worse and adds to the deep suspicion of those who do not get grants, as well as to any historian with a critical understanding of the human condition, that the whole grant-obtaining process is riddled with favouritism, ‘political correctness’ and the ruthless exercise of patron-client networks. This possibility is enhanced by the ARC’s poor practice in preferring referees from within Australia, even in subject areas that are international in their nature. Australia is a small pond and, apart from the question of the fake merit claimable only within the sheltered workshop, too often local referees judge in ways that are disturbingly up close and personal.

Two more commandments, then, and a truly manic third (it is only right that people in white coats should ere long come for those deluded about being ‘God professors’):

(vii) UWA urge strongly on the ARC the abolition in regard to the humanities of any preference to an alleged immediate benefit to the nation of research projects.
(viii) UWA urge strongly on the ARC that, accepting the reality of the globalisation of the intellect, it deploy referees from across the world for all research projects and, indeed, especially for those investigating topics about Australia itself.
Here we go into utopia, indeed: UWA urge the government to abolish the ARC and distribute the saved funds to the universities to administer themselves in combined support of quality undergraduate teaching and research.

The specific functioning of the ARC is one taxing issue. But there are also more general ones in regard to the relationship between successful research and undergraduate teaching. In my own lucky story of being employed in Australian universities from 1969, and so before we fell under ARC hegemony, I am convinced that the Richard Bosworth who has so flourished as an international historian since 1999 and who always had been publishing in London and New York, could not have existed without my long stints teaching undergraduates. LME I and those honours classes taught me span and rigour. The students instructed me how to think, how to write, how to communicate and how to treasure humankind. The books and learned articles that I had to keep abreast of across a huge historiography, the works that I needed to know about in related disciplines, every one pushed me to place my specific research in context. As a historian whose major topic was modern Italy, by definition I had to compete with a throng of Italian national historians. I could only do so if I brought to my subjects something different, something international, something contextual and something brilliantly expressed that was therefore new and different. I could do that best from a background teaching Australian undergraduates.

How sad I therefore find it to see ‘successful’ young colleagues who do not teach undergraduates from one year or decade to the next. On many fronts, including the absurd recent upgrading of everyone’s title imposed by the Vice Chancellery, UWA seems to be abandoning the (democratic) Scottish tertiary system in favour of the (hierarchical) American one. Now, in the US, ‘senior’ professors may not mark many first year essays and may hand over the tutoring at that level to their graduate assistants. Yet they do almost always lecture to undergraduate courses and are individually responsible for their form, content and reading lists. They still teach undergraduates. In Australia, that practice must be re-established and the only way to achieve it is, I fear, again to request a change at the ARC.

It is time for another commandment:
(x) UWA petition the ARC to impose a rule whereby a successful research grant is followed by a two year fallow period when an academic in the humanities must demonstrate a major commitment to undergraduate teaching.

Already ten commandments and not yet finished. Ah well, maybe my readers will be savouring the irony that is accompanying and qualifying my protestations. Anyway, as Clemenceau noted, Woodrow Wilson allowed himself fourteen at Versailles and this American president had been an academic historian (or political scientist). And, for an Australian trained on cricket, maybe XI is a more sacred number than X.

There is still an elephant in the room that I have not yet noticed. It is the place of postgraduate work in the modern Australian university. The idea of the postgraduate ‘school’ is the present twin of the ‘successful’ career in research. When UWA
administrators talk, as they feel impelled to do, about elevating UWA to 50th place or better on some (pseudo-scientific) global (or globalised) table, they lovingly tally our postgraduates as proof of our hoped-for rise. Again, it may well be, especially in ‘applied’ fields of the university, that three years or more of postgraduate and postdoctoral work is extraordinary productive and useful. But is it really so in the humanities? Is it so tout court? And can it really be of value when the undergraduate courses that lead on to postgraduate study have been so dumbed down?

What is the point of most postgraduate work in the humanities at UWA? The answer that we are all inclined to give when, in the interests of the sagging finances of our discipline group, we are seducing some potential candidate into a PhD programme, although we know that there is a minimal chance of this student winning an academic job on completion, is ‘because it is there’. History, we piously maintain, is a wonderful discipline, its study will most effectively foster a humane comprehension of the crimes, follies and tragedies of humankind. Well, yes, but … once the same case bolstered the honours programme and that only entailed extra work in third year and a further twelve months in an undergraduate programme. It carried no lying implication of an academic career at the end. It evidently broadened and ‘enlightened’ Australia in a way easier to justify to taxpayers than is the production of yet more PhDs.

Should my commandment (xi) therefore be that UWA press the government greatly to reduce the number of postgraduate scholarships and generally make much tougher the rules for entry into PhD programmes? Probably this solution is the most honest and the one that is best for Australian society, even if it would equate an appointment in the humanities in Australia with a ‘college’ job in the US.

There is an alternative, however, reflecting the fact that our tertiary programmes have drifted towards Americanisation, without fully reaching what are, after all, at the best U.S. universities, the highest academic standards. American doctorates are preceded by two to three years or more of wide-ranging course work and stringent exams. Translated into an Australian-that-was, this apprenticeship is like doing an expanded honours year over and over again. Only at the end of this process and after examination do students commence PhD research. If our own honours system is reduced to a travesty of its past, then maybe we could persuade the government to fund a genuinely rigorous doctoral programme of the American kind, improved further if it could be urged that new postgraduates spend at least twelve months of their coursework at a foreign university (and also be compelled to acquire one or more foreign languages no matter what their research area).

Commandment (xib) could therefore be that UWA press the Australian government and Australian business to finance doctoral programmes that, rather than being confined to three years, be for seven or more and contain much course work. Yes, I can hear the CEOs of our country deciding to cancel their funding of sport in favour of sponsorship of the national intellect … or are those my arms again slipping into a white coat donned back to front?
My tale, so far, then, has been unalleviated in its gloom. I have sung of the destruction of a world-class undergraduate education system and the steady conversion of Australian culture and society into being dumb or dumber. Yet, could there yet be a glimmer of light in this tragedy (remembering that comedy exposes what is irredeemably sad about the human condition, while tragedy allows for catharsis and endurance)? My hopes lie in the new undergraduate structure being introduced at UWA from 2012. It is a mistrustful hope. Colleagues in Melbourne cry that it has been a disaster for the Arts there (although, somewhere in my soul, I believe that Melbourne for some mysterious reason has long been artificially protected against the icy winds that, for a generation, have swept over other Arts faculties in Australia). My greater fear is that the new ‘generalist’ programme at UWA will be administered by those who, since the 1990s, have so cheerfully betrayed what was best in the existing undergraduate system. Can they really be weaned off their addiction to SPOT? Are not they themselves by preference, habit and personality, Measurers, death-dealing to the intellect? Can my young colleagues, beset as they are by ever more idiotic requests to fill in forms, measure and apply, free themselves from the lure of the research dream (or nightmare) for long enough to restore love to undergraduate teaching and happily mine the rich rewards to be gained there? Preaching cultural revolution or perhaps worse counter-revolution, as I seem to be doing, is not an easy role and the historical precedents of such preaching are dire.

And yet and yet? What if the inhabitants of our Vice-Chancellorcy and Senate, our Dean, heads of school and of discipline groups in the arts, as in the pure sciences, could sign the pledge and fund to a proper level undergraduate courses of time, span and rigour that increase in their intellectual demand from first year to third? What if they can agree properly to fund senior staff to do such teaching? What if they can find a way to revive a serious honours programme (the proposed B. Phil. seems to me a weak reed but at least a reed)? What if they can devote themselves to having a university committed to bringing civilisation and critical democracy to Western Australia? What if we all thereby enter a new world where no one much cares about the latest groin strain or drug problem of some West Coast Eagle but instead enjoy and debate Austen and Beethoven, Caravaggio and De Beauvoir, empiricism and fascism, God and …? What if we resurrect that happy ambition perennially to engage in making ourselves a clever country? If we do, then, whatever its placement on some artificial list, UWA will indeed be Perth’s university, a rich and variegated place where one size does not fit all, and where there is always room for an intelligent argument.

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