

Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato:

A MODERN PERSPECTIVE



photo: Diana Simmonds

One of Sydney's "own unique attributes"

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REFERENCE has been made to my somewhat extended youth at a number of universities in Australia, Britain and the United States. It was a period of my life during which someone quipped to me that I was 'a man with a promising past'!

I had the good fortune to have a university education here at Sydney University, and to have it supplemented later at Oxford. Some used to ask me about how teaching methods varied in each place and I always felt that a particular story best epitomised one dimension of the difference.

The story relates to the time when I had just arrived in Oxford keen to make a good, immediate impact as I began my course in Philosophy, Politics and Economics.

The Oxford tutorial system entailed one-on-one sessions in which students would read an essay on an assigned topic followed by a period of assessment and discussion. My first such tutorial was focused, as I recall, on a comparison of the foreign policies of Disraeli and Gladstone. And I laboured long and hard on this particular essay, determined to make a good first impression.

I had well-sourced intelligence that the tutor to whom I had been assigned was highly knowledgeable as well as very knowing, and that he was also a devotee of the game of cricket. I read my essay to him and – with a quiet, but as it turned out mistaken, confidence – awaited his academic verdict. There was a long silence before my tutor looked me in the eye and said: "I have an important question for you – do you think Greg Chappell or Ian Chappell has a better cover drive?" I knew instinctively that this was not a good sign! After an extended discussion on the history of Anglo-Australian cricket, the focus drifted back to the history of British foreign policy. What followed was a gentle, but nonetheless fairly wholesale, demolition of my first essay. I have somehow always thought that the verdict at Sydney would not have been any different in substance, but would have been far more immediate and direct in its delivery!



Michael L'Estrange: a mission to enhance informed judgment, to impart acquired wisdom, to break new ground

Tonight, as we recognise the achievements of the recipients of the Alumni Awards and the Convocation Medal, I think it is worth reflecting on the changing modern role of the University and how alumni can relate to it.

One of the great intellectual challenges which each generation faces is to discern patterns of continuity and change in their societies. There is a particular dimension in this challenge for institutions, and an especially important one for universities.

For more than a century and a half, generations of students have studied at Sydney University under a coat of arms that bears the Latin 'Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato' – 'the stars change, the mind remains the same'.

One of the originators of the motto was Francis Merewether, a founder of this University and a former Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor. Merewether and others associated with the University in its earliest days saw continuity, not change, in its foundation: in particular continuity with the intellectual traditions of the great universities of Britain, and especially with Oxford and Cambridge.

The founders of the University chose a motto that highlighted geographic distance but also shared values, with the Oxbridge association being reinforced in the University's early academic traditions as well as its architecture.

For all the strength of these connections, however, Sydney University's establishment and development reflected a more complex mix of continuity and change than Francis Merewether and others were prepared to concede.

For all its outward associations with the Oxbridge model, the reality always was that Sydney University evolved as an amalgam of many influences, foreign and local, as it acquired its own unique attributes.

Sydney University was never just a faint echo or pale imitation of the Old World.

From its earliest days, it was not only the stars that were different for Sydney University and Oxbridge. They had different social contexts in which they operated, with different kinds of societies, different class structures and different mobility between the classes. They were different in their religious contexts, with England's Established Church having no corollary in Australia.

They were also different in the international influences on them, with the universities of Scotland and Ireland as well as Oxbridge exerting particular influences on the teaching methods and academic structures of the new university in Sydney.

As Australia's links with Britain changed, so too did Sydney University's affinity with Oxbridge. The balance continued to shift in favour of change over continuity: change that reflected Australian circumstances and needs, change that saw the University's roots in the Australian national culture deepen and strengthen.

This pattern of change at Sydney University was not rejectionist. The academic associations with Oxbridge, and Britain generally, remained strong. As Tennyson wrote in *Ulysses*: "tho' much is taken, much abides". But Sydney increasingly acquired its own distinctiveness, its own traditions, its own achievements and, of course, its own alumni.

Today, the issue for Sydney University is not one of change or continuity in relation to Oxbridge or any other university model.

Sydney University has established its *own* model. It has defined its own aspirations. It has developed its own relationships with the wider community of which it is part. It has nurtured its own wide range of international associations that reflect its own broad interests.

In my view, there is an irony in this historical development of the University that people such as Francis Merewether would find fascinating. The University motto with which he is associated has been interpreted by some over the years as epitomising a colonial cringe and an Australia that had long been transformed.

And yet there are two modern realities that add new dimensions of relevance of the University motto.

The first is the rapidly expanding global market for intellectual capital. The stars may change but university teachers and students the world over are pursuing quality educational and research outcomes. Geography matters far less than quality, and quality is defined by increasingly universal criteria.

There is testimony to this new reality in so many aspects of Sydney University's life – in the students attending the University from so many nations around the world, in the attraction of so many Australian students to a period of international university education, and in the multinational character of so much of the University's academic collaboration. The benchmark is not narrowly Oxbridge, it is certainly and increasingly internationalist.

And secondly, there has always been a real sense in which Francis Merewether and the other founders of Sydney University were right in proclaiming that 'the mind remains the same'.

Sydney University is clearly different in so many fundamental ways from the time when the motto was adopted: different in its relationship to the broader community, different in its linkages to the wider demands of the economy, different in its responsiveness to developments in society at large, and different in terms of the pressures to which it is subject and the expectations of it as an institution.

And yet for all this change, there are also important elements of continuity. Sydney University still aims, as it always has, to produce graduates with enquiring minds and the capacity for balanced and informed judgment; graduates with strong technical skills and a capacity for lifelong learning; graduates with a keen awareness of purposes beyond themselves and perspectives that embrace all of humanity and not just part of it; graduates with the skills and inclination to provide leadership in their chosen fields of endeavour.

Sydney University's continuing mission since Merewether's day has been, and continues to be, to produce graduates who know the difference between information and knowledge, between intelligence and wisdom; graduates who pursue truth and insight on the basis of available facts and evidence; graduates whose healthy scepticism does not degenerate into a consuming and destructive cynicism; graduates who can see through bias and prejudice and who are open to new thinking not just because it is new but because it is more appropriate to the needs of their time.

In short, the University aims – as it always has – to produce graduates who are neither professional pessimists nor unrealistic optimists, whose purpose is to develop their talents to the full and contribute to the common good, and whose place (in Theodore Roosevelt's famous words of almost a century ago) is never with 'those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat'.

As alumni, we often fall short of these objectives. But if we fail to aspire to them, I believe that we are failing the intellectual heritage of which we are part.

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Under whatever stars, the training of the mind for these and other objectives has an enduring and consistent quality about it: enduring across time and consistent across geography. The means by which that training is conducted certainly changes as does the scientific, social, economic, strategic, technological, environmental and other contexts in which it is carried out. But the qualities of the mind to which this training is directed, and to which Sydney University as an institution is committed, do have a shared and consistent heritage across time and across national borders.

"Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato" is, therefore, a motto with new relevance as well as meaning that has endured.

In one sense, the motto has come full circle in that the University's sense of its international engagement has broadened in a transforming way and has become more central to its purpose than ever before.

In another sense, however, the University's motto evokes a mission that has not changed: it remains a mission to enhance informed judgment, to impart acquired wisdom, to break new ground, to pursue purposes beyond ourselves and to provide community leadership across the full spectrum of its meaning.

It is important that the University's alumni continue to be inspired by both its changing role and its enduring mission.

Today we honour particular alumni who have achieved greatly in both respects. We congratulate them for their commitment to the highest ideals of this University and for their practical achievements in enriching the lives of others. And we are grateful to them for the inspiration they give us to be, in Tennyson's words again,

... *strong in will*

To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield. ■