

A difficult legacy

Largely ignored by contemporary thinkers and students, John Anderson is unquestionably one of the “greats” in Australian cultural history, writes **Creagh Cole** (MA (Hons) '86 PhD '96)

Last year marked the 50th anniversary of John Anderson's retirement from the Challis Chair of Philosophy at the University. Since his arrival in 1927 until his retirement in 1958, Anderson provided Sydney students with a distinctive and powerful example of what critical philosophical inquiry could and should be.

It was not unusual for Scottish philosophers to be selected to educate the colony's teachers, ministers and lawyers when Anderson was appointed in 1926. What was unclear at the time of his appointment, however, was the extent to which he could provide the safe pair of hands required for the guidance of this city's excitable youth. A brilliant graduate of Scottish philosophy with a firm grounding in philosophical tradition, Anderson rejected the idealist uplift of his predecessors, presenting instead a philosophy that was relentlessly unsentimental, even pessimistic. And he presented his unique brand of modernist realism through intensive studies in the history of philosophy and provocative references to the works of such diverse figures as Hegel, Marx, Lenin, Freud, Socrates, Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Sorel and James Joyce. His lectures would prove to be an exhilarating experience for his Sydney students.

To many, he is the most influential and controversial philosopher ever to have worked in Australia. His students include some of the most significant philosophers of their generation, including the internationally-recognised DM Armstrong, John Passmore, J L Mackie, and Eugene Kamenka. But Anderson's influence extended well beyond the academy to the professions of journalism, law and politics, and to that shifting bohemian cultural force known as “the Sydney Push”. In fact, it would be impossible

to write the cultural history of this city without examining the influence of John Anderson.

Within only a few years of his arrival, Anderson – always politically radical and ready to offend – had become a “theoretical advisor” to the Australian Communist Party. There were calls in State Parliament for him to be shipped back to Glasgow. He abandoned all ties with the socialist movement in later life, but Anderson became a major figure of resistance to commercially-directed vocational education at the University, a resolute defender of academic freedom and a rallying opponent of intellectual and cultural censorship in Australia.

Anderson changed the nature of intellectual debate in Sydney at all levels. And Sydney would provide a congenial home and opportunity for Anderson to develop his philosophical position in relative isolation from the rest of the philosophical world.

If Anderson's isolation denied him the points of comparison which may have made his philosophy more interesting and appealing to later students, it did tend to preserve a way of practising philosophical inquiry denied to students elsewhere. This was, arguably, the great value of an Andersonian apprenticeship in philosophical inquiry.

Anderson believed in the need for the establishment and maintenance of a school of philosophy able to pursue its activities and inquiries wherever they would lead. The practice of independent inquiry was a precious achievement and inheritance, the support and defence of which was the primary justification for the very existence of a university community. For Anderson, philosophy was not about reconciling various points of view or accommodating one's position to whatever fleeting trends were current at any given time. A tradition of philosophical inquiry presented

its participants with a form of apprenticeship and training in critical thought.

John Anderson is unquestionably one of the “greats” in Australian cultural history. Yet his philosophy is largely ignored by contemporary teachers and students. Such an evident failure in Australian intellectual history might in part be explained by the incendiary impact of his teaching on the next generation of teachers and philosophers. By the early 1970s, barely 10 years after Anderson's death, the sole indication of Anderson's existence at the University was the sombre, slightly depressing blue and green portrait by William Dobell hanging in the University Library. As a student at that time I don't recall Anderson's name being mentioned in a single university course I attended. That was, of course, a time of intense political and administrative turmoil on campus. Indeed, barely 10 years after Anderson's death, his old department had once again been the subject of critical debate in State Parliament and would eventually split into two entirely separate departments. Some of his old students considered the intensity and intractability of some of these disputes in some sense the final legacy of the professor. Nonetheless, by the 1970s students of philosophy at Sydney had become ignorant or uncertain of Anderson's existence, much less his importance.

Among academic philosophers Anderson's work has become an historical curiosity, an example of a form of inquiry belonging to an earlier metaphysical age with little relevance to our more sophisticated philosophical concerns. At best Anderson evidently provided his more famous students with an undeniable ability to point to deficiencies in the linguistically – and scientifically – oriented philosophies of their time.

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These students found that they were unable to communicate to their colleagues the sense of excitement and importance that they had found in the lectures of their teacher. Even contemporary realist philosophers in Australia who might be expected to respect Anderson's legacy cannot understand the influence Anderson exerted. Many are frankly baffled by the evidence of Anderson's academic publications, collected most conveniently in his *Studies In Empirical Philosophy* of 1961. These writings are terse and difficult for modern students.

Contemporary philosophers at their most charitable suggest that a true appreciation of Anderson's philosophy required personal contact with the man. It is, then, of some importance that we have at least indirect access to the professor's lecture room, with a large collection of lecture notes held in the University Archives and a growing number of lecture series preserved and donated by students of the 1930s, '40s and '50s. When Anderson's son Alexander ("Sandy") Anderson died in 1995, he left to the University a bequest for the continuing study and publication of his father's lectures and notes. He

also left a large collection of personal papers, writings and the family library which have been an invaluable resource for Anderson scholars, bibliographers and biographers. In the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry the position of John Anderson Senior Research Fellow was established to conduct research into the life and works of John Anderson as one of the University's most distinguished teachers and scholars. Sandy Anderson's bequest has given the University an opportunity to re-evaluate and more fully understand one of its great intellectual figures.

The current John Anderson Archive is an online archive of his published and unpublished writings and is a direct outcome of successive research fellows, George Molnar, Mark Weblin and Creagh McLean Cole. It is, however, the realisation of a project initiated by Anderson's successor, D M Armstrong, who declared the need for just such an Anderson Archive almost 40 years ago in 1971.

Drawing upon this online archive Sydney University Press has published several books over the past decade, including *Studies In Empirical Philosophy*. But most recently and

perhaps most importantly it has published a series of books drawn from lecture notes delivered over three decades. These books provide some sense of the John Anderson lecture room. **SAM**

The titles currently published include:

On Greek Philosophy (1928) – introduction by Graham Cullum

On Modern Philosophy: Hume, Reid and James (1932-35) – edited by Creagh McLean Cole

On Political Philosophy: Green, Bosanquet and Socialism (1941-45) – edited by Creagh McLean Cole

On Metaphysics (1940s and 1950s) Space Time and the Proposition introduction by Mark Weblin and George Molnar, and *Space, Time and the Categories*, introduction by D M Armstrong).

Further information:

The John Anderson Archive is at <http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/anderson>

The SUP titles are at <http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/anderson/sup.html>

Sydney University Press is <http://sup.usyd.edu.au/>