HATE THOSE MEECES

I thought the article on the correct pronunciation of Latin by Professor Hoyos (SAM Spring ’09) was most interesting. It is, of course, entirely appropriate that Latin scholars should be concerned with this aspect of the Latin language. But the matter is largely a historical one. Even in Roman times I’m sure that pronunciation varied considerably throughout Italy. And when we come to the pronunciation of Latin words that have been adopted into the English language we should not feel bound by the way Julius Caesar or Cicero pronounced words. Nor, when we import foreign words, should we feel obliged to adopt the spelling or grammar or the formation of plurals or any other aspect of the original language. We should apply the ordinary rules and conventions of our own language.

Professor Hoyos takes as examples to illustrate his theme the words “alumnus”, “alumni”, “alumna” and “alumnae”. The Oxford English Dictionary has not adopted these words and perhaps for a good reason. The English language has avoided words for the female member of a profession or occupation. There are no such words for butchers, bakers or candlestick makers, nor for doctors, dentists or engineers. The words that we have for such people are often somewhat derogatory. Think of “prostitute”, “spinster”, “actress”. Prostitutes now prefer the term hostess and actresses prefer to be called “actors”. So, let’s get rid of “alumna”. If there is any female graduate calling herself an alumna she should be awarded a “Spinster of Arts” degree.

Professor Hoyos’ examples include plural words. In English we normally form plurals by adding “s” or “ed” to the singular word. We depart from this rule only for good reason, for example, when the rule produces a word that is difficult to say. So, we prefer “mice” as the plural of “mouse”, because we don’t like “mouses”. The same applies to imported words. It so happens that the plurals of imported words in the original language are often easy to say and preferable to our “s/es” rule, so we adopt them. “Alumni” is preferable to “alumnuses”, “Phenomena” is preferred to “phenomens”. “Data” is preferred to “datums”, “agenda” to “agendums”. The singulars of the last two examples are so rarely used that many people, including academics, use the plurals as though they were singular nouns, even to the extent of combining them with singular verbs, to the horror of purists like myself. Perhaps one day some authority will define “data” and “agenda” to be singular nouns and then we can all relax.

Liam Burke
University of Sydney

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

The article by Kane Race [SAM Summer ’09/’10] is too accurate for my comfort or pleasure. Many of my children and grandchildren have been users of one or more of the “illicit drugs” as well as those that are commercially available on the open market. Many of my clients in my relationship counselling practice have taken the process further and have become sellers to support their use to a level where psychoses become a problem for them and all who know them. So I claim to know something of the rough end of the business.

My issue with Race arises from my experience that the same pattern is present exactly in the promotion of programs that are supposed to be aimed at reducing interpersonal violence, community fear, and terror of all sorts. The ways such programs are carried out have exactly the opposite effect to their claimed one. It appears that too many profit from the tales that are told to avoid their use. As a trivial example, I find the opposite effect to their claimed one. It appears that too many profit from the tales that are told to avoid their use. As a trivial example, I find the experiences of programs that are supposed to prevent violence, community fear, and terror of all sorts. The ways such programs are carried out have exactly the opposite effect to their claimed one. It appears that too many profit from the tales that are told to avoid their use. As a trivial example, I find the

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the editor should include: full name, address [not for publication], degree(s) and year(s) of graduation where applicable, daytime phone number and/or email address. Please address your letters to:

The Editor
SAM
K6.05 Quadrangle A14
University of Sydney NSW 2006

Letters may also be sent electronically (with full contact details) to:
diana.simmonds@sydney.edu.au

Opinions expressed in the pages of the magazine are those of the signed contributors or the editor and do not necessarily represent the official position of the University of Sydney.

Space permits only a selection of letters to be published here. Letters may be edited by the editor for space or other reasons.
LAMENTABLE ELITISM

Dr Kane Race’s arguments [SAM] in favour of a change of approach to pleasure and health suffer from the insularity of his discipline. His arguments might apply to adults within a hedonistic philosophical framework, but ignore the question of how are we to educate young people. Dr Race portrays a preference for strategies to prevent the prevalence of drug use over strategies of harm reduction as political posturing and thinly veiled attempts by the police to bolster their own authority. This ignores the fact that most people who have children want their children to grow up in an environment as free of drugs as possible. This is a sensible desire as young people’s brains are particularly susceptible to being damaged by drug use. Libertarianism is only available to those who survive unscathed to the age at which they can make informed choices.

And it would be useful to know whether Dr Race uses the term “donkey vote” to describe the opinions of those who disagree with him or whether the term was chosen by the editors of SAM in their description of his article in the contents page. If it was the SAM editors, this portrays a lamentable elitism on their part.

Martin Fitzgerald (BA ’78)
Chatswood NSW

Dr Kane Race responds: I share Martin Fitzgerald’s concern about how best to educate young people about drugs. However, unlike Fitzgerald, I do not think that a drug-free society is attainable, especially given the prolific nature of the contemporary pharmaceutical industry. In this context I believe that a consideration of pleasure and its relation to care might be a good way forward educationally - it is certainly something that has been very effective within HIV education. Some of the recently fashionable policing strategies are highly problematic in that they appear to be exacerbating harms from drugs, rather than preventing them. I am sure that no one would want this for their children.

DRUGS ON TABLE PLEASE

I found Dr Kane Race’s article “The Pleasure Principle” [SAM] a wonderfully refreshing treatise on the issue of recreational drugs. Being underpinned by both scholarly research and a great deal of common sense, his arguments are powerful. I wish that our politicians would embrace the sophisticated approach advocated by Dr Race, and end the utterly stupid high-handedness and arrogance that are the hallmarks of the current approach. The more the recreational drug issue is swept under the table, the more it will continue to leak out in highly undesirable ways. Dr Race’s book should be compulsory reading for all those in government!

Glenn Leembruggen BE(Elec) ’77
Leichhardt NSW

ARE WE HERE YET?

More disappointment, [SAM Spring ’09]. In any other debate both sides are required to make their point, but according to Dmitri Perno, not in the God debate! Is he having that much difficulty making a case – anyway, put another way he is on the affirmative side, affirming there is no god.

There is no need for believers in a Christian God to invoke “ancient mythology and primitive superstition” nor “hypothetical beings and supernatural acts”. The Universe from the “big bang” to the present, from gluons to dark matter, is proof enough that it and we are here.

In fact, though, there is no certainty scientifically that there is a god, nor, indeed, that there is a no God. Isn’t that the way it should be?

Dr Kevin Orr (MBBS ’51)
Blakehurst NSW

THE NEVER-ENDING STORY

I was surprised at the amount of space allocated to Clyde Philip Long’s letter [SAM Summer 09/10], with the anti-religion theme being amplified by the needlessly gratuitous quotation above it. However I haven’t read his previous letter, and take the present letter at face value, which appears to be a spray at “religion”, mostly Christianity.

If ever reach the age that Mr Long appears to be, I imagine I might be as frustrated with atheists as he is with people of faith! He says at the end “obviously faith and its absence will always lie in the area of never the twain shall meet” (fair enough), and announces his withdrawal from the “fray”. If the fray refers to his struggle to get “proof” of the “truthiness” of “religion” from people of faith, then withdrawal is indeed the way to go, because scientific proof of the kind he demands cannot be given. However to withdraw from the faith/no faith dialogue would be a pity. Religion is not science, but that doesn’t make it less valid for a meaningful existence. Perhaps Einstein was near the mark in saying Science without Religion is lame, and Religion without Science is blind.

Bob Hinchcliffe (BEd ’64)
Wahroonga NSW

W CIV DEAD

1960s physics lectures were without the internet, good textbooks [except Booth & Nicoll] or handouts. My strategy was to frantically scribble every word onto a notepad; expand the abbreviations on the homebound public transport; then try to understand the result at home. Fortunately, I was consoled by two anecdotes: one from Sydney’s Bob May and one from Copenhagen’s Niels Bohr.

Bob told of a lecturer trying for the best but getting no response from the group of students frantically scribbling away. The lecturer threw down his notes in despair, exclaiming, “Western civilisation is dead!”. The students scribbled, “W civ dead”.

Bob claimed that a physics topic could only be understood by giving three lectures on it. The first arranged it in a logical order; the second improved the connections; the third was perfect; so he moved on to another topic.

Physics lectures were of three types [excepting Bob’s lectures, of course] best described by Bohr’s story: A young man was sent by his village to a neighbouring town to hear a great rabbi. When he returned he told his eagerly waiting fellow citizens: ‘The rabbit spoke three times. The first was brilliant; clear and simple. I understood every word. The second was even better, deep and subtle. I didn’t understand much, but the rabbit understood it all. The third was by far the finest; a great and unforgettable experience. I understood nothing and the rabbit didn’t understand much either.”

Malcolm Cameron (PhD Physics ’71)
Camberwell VIC

S M A R C H 2 0 1 0  3
COUNSELLING CORINTHIANS

Clyde Long (SAM, Summer 09/10) describes his position on the question of the existence of God as “agnostic-atheist”. The atheist position, at least as espoused by people such as Richard Dawkins (whom Clyde sides with), seems problematic because it insists that empirical methodology provides the only reliable means of establishing truth. For such a position to be arguable, it seems that there would need to be a higher authority than human reason determining that that is so. In other words, how can it be proved empirically that we should only believe things we can prove empirically?

If God (the God of the Bible, for argument’s sake) does exist, then all recourse to human reason as the ultimate arbiter of truth in the matter is futile, since an omnipotent, omniscient, spirit being can presumably reveal himself in precisely the manner, and to the extent, that he chooses. In other words, we can only ever know such a God in accordance with his revelation of himself, not by means of human efforts to work out whether or not he exists. This is why it is simply not sensible to suggest, as atheists such as Dawkins do, that the God of the Bible “probably doesn’t exist”.

Like everyone who has examined the evidence for the existence (or non-existence) of God, Clyde Long has made a choice. To suggest that opting for an atheist position is more reasonable or logical than that of the theist can grip things”.

Peter Kruse (BSc(Hons)) ’76, PhD ’81
Second Valley SA

TRENDY NONSENSE

“New decade, new dynamic” (SAM Summer ’09) relates the exciting news that the University is to have a new “brand identity” to make it less “arrogant, old fashioned, ivory-towerish”. This includes turning the coat of arms (granted by Queen Victoria, I believe) into a trendy “logo”. How sad. How pathetic. The current financial crisis has greatly affected the University’s finances, and departments and other units are being told to make budget cuts which are diminishing their ability to support the University’s work. At this time, especially, how can it be justified to spend scarce resources on consultants’ fees and on re-doing signage, stationery, etc to create a new ‘image’? Here’s one graduate who won’t be making any more annual donations to support this sort of nonsense.

Neil A Radford (BEC ‘64)
Balmain NSW

Aesthetic opinions obviously vary, and we are sorry that Mr Radford does not like the new logo, but many prefer the simpler, cleaner look.

As well as retaining all the heraldic components required under the grant of arms, the logo is based on a traditional medieval shield shape. While it differs from the more ornate crest of recent times, it is not the first occasion the University has used such a shape. A coat of arms very similar to the new logo is carved in the sandstone fireplace in the Chancellor’s office. This shape is better suited to reproduction in the wide variety of media, particularly online, that we work with today. The first coat of arms used by the University in 1857 has been retained for ceremonial use on testamurs.

We can assure Mr Radford that this project was carried out as economically as possible, and for an organisation of the University’s size, working in a competitive public environment and with a turnover of $1.4 billion, it represented a modest investment. The bulk of the implementation costs were covered through business-as-usual expenditure and most of our implementation decisions were based on reducing waste and minimising expenditure.

Marian Theobald,
Executive Director, External Relations

NEO-COLONIAL BIFFO

Classifying AFL as a code of football (End of the Barassi Line, SAM, Spring ’09) seems a dubious stretch of taxonomy. A more accurate classification would be as a species of Thai boxing. The feature distinguishing it as a separate species is that whereas, in the main species, the boxing and kicking are directed against a human opponent, in AFL they are – mostly – directed against a leather spheroid, more or less ovoid in shape, and a bit squathy. The error presumably occurred through the vauling ambition natural in the colony of a colony.

Ken Goodwin
[BA ’56 DipEd ’57 MA ’63]
Brookfield Qld

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Susan Ryan argues the case for a Human Rights Act for Australia (SAM Summer 09/10). I do not agree with her, as I do not think such an Act would achieve the desired result, but would simply be something for armies of lawyers to argue over forever more.

I find it amazing that the many advocates of a Human Rights Act never mention the other R word – responsibility. With rights there go responsibilities. I think that if Australia ever has a Human Rights Act inflicted upon it, then it should also have a Human Responsibilities Act to accompany it.

We live in the Age of Irresponsibility. Many are always demanding their rights, but far fewer are prepared to accept responsibility for their actions.

Alan Templeman (BDS ’57)
Wyoming NSW

FLAT EARTHERS PLEASE

SAM has published a spirited defence of the Young Earth Theory by an alumnus with a degree in Agriculture (Summer 09/10), but nothing about the equally valid Flat Earth theory. Are there no supporters among graduates with – say – honours in geography?

Another strange lacuna concerns egocentricity. Any anti-Copernican alumni should make themselves heard. It is quite clear in Holy Scripture (Josh. 10:13) that the Sun revolves around the Earth, as Galileo was reminded by the biblical scholars of his time.

GFJ Moir (BSc ’49)
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

THE WINNING LETTER

THIS ISSUE’S PRIZE-WINNING LETTER IS FROM MALCOLM CAMERON (PHD PHYSICS ’71) OF CAMBERWELL VIC.

THE GIFT IS A SINGULAR VOICE, A SPLENDID VOLUME OF ESSAYS ON ART AND ARCHITECTURE BY THE LATE PROFESSOR JOAN KERR. SEE THE BOOK REVIEW PAGES IN THIS ISSUE FOR MORE ON THE BOOK.

THANKS TO POWER BOOKS

GETTING A GRASP

Atheist CP Long (SAM Summer 09/10) summarily dismisses all responses to his original letter because they “appear to argue from the basis of an acceptance of the Christian Bible” (Heaven forbid!) and therefore result from the “closed mind of ‘faith’”. As if no one ever became a Christian via a reasoned consideration of the issues!

I like the response of the physicist William Bragg when asked to comment on the opposition between science and religion. He said (my paraphrase), “Yes, science and religion are opposed, but not in the way most people think. They are opposed in the way a finger and thumb are opposed: with both, you can grasp things”.

Peter Kruse (BSc(Hons)) ’76, PhD ’81
Second Valley SA

TRENDY NONSENSE

“New decade, new dynamic” (SAM Summer ’09) relates the exciting news that the University is to have a new “brand identity” to make it less “arrogant, old fashioned, ivory-towerish”. This includes turning the coat of arms (granted by Queen