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WARNING

Dr H.L. Fowler

Some personal associations

Pat Pentony

Dr H.L. Fowler was one of the founders of Australian Psychology. The department he established at the University of Western Australia in the late nineteen twenties was second only to that at Sydney to come into being as an independent department of psychology at an Australian university.

His drive, enthusiasm and the strong empirical basis that he favoured gave the Department a firm foundation on which his successors could build in subsequent years.

No doubt the main details of his work up to his death in 1946 are adequately documented in the Society's archives. These notes are intended only to add a few personal details from my association with him that may be of interest to some future biographer.

I had no more contact with Dr Fowler than that of the average student taking a major in psychology until the end of my third year in 1937. At that point I received a note from him asking me to see him. I made an appointment and duly arrived for an interview at which he asked me what I was proposing to do in 1938.

It was a question that was exercising me. I had initially enrolled in the School of Modern Literature and had continued to major in that school with the prospect of taking honours in English Literature. By accident rather than design, I had also satisfied the requirements to proceed to a fourth honours year in the School of Philosophy and Psychology. However my main aim had been to become a teacher and while completing my third year, I had also served a year as a monitor (or pupil teacher) in the State Education Department. At the time of my interview with Fowler I had been offered a place in the Teachers' College for 1938 which, if I accepted, would preclude my taking honours in either English or Psychology and, if I refused, would have me without a job in 1939. To make my situation a bit more complex, my enthusiasm for teaching had been dampened by my experience during the year in the State system, so I had applied, without much hope of success, for a position of Cadet Patrol Officer in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea.

I explained all this to Fowler who listened patiently. After some discussion, he said he thought I should consider doing honours in psychology. He went on to say that, if I chose to do so, he thought he could get me a grant of 150 pounds (a significant amount in those

days) from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to support me during the year provided I could propose a suitable research project.

When I hesitated in taking up his suggestion, because it would mean resigning the security of a job with the State Education Department for a very uncertain future, he told me he had resigned from the position of headmaster of a government high school, sold his house and gone off to London to take a Ph.D. under Spearman without any long term prospects. He said he had never since been as well off as he was then and doubted if he ever would be again, but he did not regret his action for a moment. He was now doing what he wanted to do.

The outcome of our discussion was that I applied for a grant from ACER, resigned from the Education Department and took a vacation job as a weighbridge clerk (which paid much more than the pittance I was getting from the Department) at a siding in the Southern Wheat Belt. Fowler, who kept in touch with my movements, wrote to some former school teaching friends who had taken up farming in that area and they made me very welcome.

During the vacation, while I was still at Kulin (the wheat handling centre where I was working), I got a letter from Fowler telling me that the ACER grant had been approved. Almost at the same time I got a letter from the Commonwealth Public Service Inspector offering me a job as a Cadet Patrol Officer in New Guinea.

I wrote to Fowler who got in touch with the Public Service Inspector and asked that the appointment be deferred for twelve months while I took an honours degree. He argued that it would be to their advantage to have someone with a further year of training and an honours degree. He sent me a copy of his letter.

Somewhat to my surprise, a letter came back from the Public Service Inspector agreeing to the deferment providing there was a vacancy at the end of 1938.

I returned to the University in February and began trying to map out an approach to the project I had selected which had something to do with the relationship between suggestibility and delinquency. I had just enough time to realise the difficulty of the task when Fowler came up with another proposal. A German Ethnological Expedition from the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt was about to arrive in Australia and would be spending most of the year in the Western Kimberleys copying cave paintings and studying

the aboriginal culture. Fowler saw this as an opportunity for me to learn something of anthropological research procedures which I could use when I went to New Guinea and proposed that I should go with it. He said that if I was interested he would take it up with the leader of the expedition when it arrived.

He was in a position to make this contact because, in the absence of a department of anthropology in the University, he was asked to act on its behalf in welcoming the visitors and extending to them such support as the University could provide.

At the time I felt things were getting a bit out of my hands. I raised the problem of financing my participation in the expedition since I would have to give up the ACER grant and I had no other source of funds.

Fowler was not to be deterred by such incidentals. Within a short space of time he had organised a Hackett Bursary and an interest free loan from the University for me. Needless to say he also made the necessary arrangements with the leader of the expedition, Dr. Helmut Petri, for me to accompany it.

After I returned from the Kimberleys towards the end of the year, completed the formalities for an honours degree and departed to New Guinea, I continued to correspond with Fowler. While in New Guinea I was awarded a Hackett Research Studentship from UWA for study in England or USA. In August 1940 I returned to Australia uncertain as to my next course of action. I contracted pneumonia on my way back and was seriously ill in hospital for over a month. At the time the war was at a critical stage with the battle for Britain raging.

After I recovered from pneumonia — a fairly slow process in those pre-penicillin days — I was called up for a ninety day camp in the Citizens Military Forces. The unit in which I served was the 44th Battalion. This was the unit in which Fowler had served in World War 1 on the Western Front with the rank of Captain. He came into the camp at his old rank as Officer-in-Charge of "C" Company. Sam Hammond and Peter Liversey who had just completed their fourth honours year were also called up in that camp as were a number of other university students. Sam, Peter and I served in the "intelligence" unit of the battalion which was considerably enlarged to accommodate a surplus of academic types.

Our relationship as privates with Fowler who was a Company Commander was somewhat different from that of an academic sitting. While we had almost no direct contact with him we were aware of his reputation which was that of being strict in adherence to the military rules. There was nothing casual about his approach to military training. As with everything he did, he went at it with one hundred per cent commitment.

As an example of his zeal I would quote the last exercise of that camp which took place at the end of April. The battalion marched north along the coast from our camp at Melville (now the campus of Murdoch University) to the vicinity of Trigg Island where we dug in to repel a hypothetical invasion. The weather was relatively good until we got to our destination, but that night a southerly change blew in with driving rain. It was a horribly cold, wet and miserable night with strong winds blowing. Some of the Company Commanders in view of the conditions, allowed their men to take cover in whatever shelter was available whether in empty huts or in the lee of sand dunes. Not so Fowler. He had his men out on guard keeping watch and, to ensure they did so, he patrolled the area accompanied by his company sergeant throughout the night. I happened to be attached to his company for the exercise, but as my duties were nebulous, I took a position in the lee of a sand dune where I made myself dry and cosy with the aid of a ground sheet. From my bunker I could hear Fowler and his NCO intermittently through the night as they stumbled around among the dunes checking the sentries.

In later camps Fowler moved from the 44th to the 11th Battalion in which he was Second in Command with the rank of Major. No doubt his pattern of behaviour continued. It must have imposed a severe strain on the man entering his sixth decade. Years later he told me it caused the asthma (which eventually killed him). It began, he said, as a form of hay fever and progressively became more severe.

After the camp I joined the RAAF and was trained as a weather forecaster. While I was undergoing training in Melbourne I met Fowler, who was over to discuss the establishment of the Army Psychology Unit, on a few occasions. It was a bitter disappointment to him that, when the unit was established, he was no longer medically fit for army service.

I lost contact with him after 1941 and did not renew it until late 1945 when I was appointed to a lectureship at UWA. I returned to Perth in early 1946 and met him after a lapse of four years. I was shocked at the change in him. He must have lost a third of his weight and looked a shadow of his former robust self.

However, he had not lost his enthusiasm and determination to build a large and strong department. He had drawn up a plan for a new (temporary) building for the Psychology Department. At the time the University administration wanted to get the Psychology Department out of the Winthrop Hall tower and was prepared to make a substantial contribution to a new building. The Universities' Commission was also making grants to universities to allow for expansion to meet the needs of ex-servicemen who were about to flow into universities. Fowler hoped that by using both sources he would be able to get the space he wanted. The plan he put forward was extremely ambitious. Perhaps it was an ambit claim. When I asked him how he was going to use the many laboratories, lecture rooms, research and demonstration rooms, he said he wanted to make the Department a research centre in the social sciences that would provide services for government agencies and commercial organisations. At the time his interests were in social psychology which he saw as the major developing field in the discipline. Much of his energy during the first term of 1946 was devoted to making a case for the building.

One relatively minute section of the planned building was a workshop which included a small office and an instrument maker's room as well as providing for the large power tools — lathe, saws, drills etc. He had succeeded in having a technician appointed to the Department — a very able and intelligent man named Bill Wisdom who seemed to be skilled in a wide range of trades from instrument making to carpentry and who was willing to turn his hand to anything from setting up public address systems to designing and making intricate pieces of experimental apparatus.

In getting a technician appointed and the consequent establishment of a workshop, Fowler broke new ground and set a precedent which other departments of psychology were able to exploit subsequently. At the time it constituted a significant breakthrough as may be illustrated by an anecdote. In 1947, after we had our workshop built and equipped, the Senate of the University (its governing body) decided that it would be a good idea if its members paid visits to the departments to see how they operated. One of the first to visit us was Dr Sommerville, a long standing Senate member who kept a close eye on how the University's moneys were spent and after whom the outdoor auditorium in the university grounds is named. I showed him over the Department. At the next Senate meeting he commented along the following lines: "I should like to say that I have found these opportunities to visit the Departments very informative. In one I found a workshop equipped with a lathe, a circular saw, a band saw, a power drill, work bench and numerous hand tools. You can imagine my astonishment to discover that all this equipment is essential for the teaching of psychology". His comment caused much amusement.

In planning and establishing the first technical workshop in an Australian university Psychology Department, Bill Wisdom, or "Wizzy" as Fowler called him, deserves a place in the history of Australian Psychology.

Throughout the first term of 1946, while I occupied a room immediately above Fowler's study in the tower of Winthrop Hall, I could frequently hear him struggling with an asthmatic attack. He had a kit with which he gave himself injections of adrenalin when necessary. Sometimes he was unable to take a class. Once when he rang to advise that he would be unable to come in to take his class, I took the class for him. I was told in quiet but firm tones not to do that again but to cancel the class.

On the last day of that term, I talked with him in his study. He spoke mainly about the fourth year honours and postgraduate students. Before we parted he told me that he was going into hospital during the vacation for some experimental treatment that would constitute a drastic attempt to cure his asthma. It was, he said, going to be a case of kill or cure. There was a risk, but he was prepared to try anything that promised permanent relief from the asthma. At the time I did not appreciate the extent of the risk. That meeting in his study was the last time I saw him.

It was typical of the man to take a risk to achieve what he wanted. He believed in going straight and wholeheartedly for the goal. If one met opposition on the way then one countered it as best he could. He did not shirk a fight. In building up the Department in its early years he had to overcome some resistance in academic circles. In the late 1930s there was a Commission of Enquiry under Mr Justice Woolf into the affairs of UWA. Among the findings was, in effect, a criticism of Fowler for having built up the Department to a size out of proportion to its significance as a university discipline. Fowler was hurt and angered by the report. It was a consolation for him to receive from Professor Tasman Lovell of Sydney University a letter of support. In the letter which Fowler cherished, Lovell said that it seemed to him Fowler was being criticised for doing his job too well.

As a pioneer of psychology in Australia, Dr Fowler laid the foundations on which others were able to build. If he was prevented from fully realising his aims, by ill health in the case of Army Psychology and by the war and his untimely death in the case of the University, he opened the way for those who came after.

He was a man who believed in the virtues of hard work and consistent effort, but he could also enjoy life and had a somewhat impish sense of humour. I had the pleasure of being with him in one of the happier moments of his last year. It occurred one Saturday morning in early February 1946. The late Cecily de Monchaux, who had just arrived from Sydney to take up a lectureship, and I were in his study discussing the teaching programme for the coming term when Fowler looked at his watch and said he would have to adjourn our meeting. His son Stuart was due to take part in the State Junior (under 16) breast stroke championship and he wanted to be at the baths for the race. He asked us if we would like to accompany him. We said we would, so we all went out, got into his car (a stately old lady of very upright carriage that had been a land mark at the University from my first days there in 1935) and he drove us down to the Crawley Baths. On the way he told us that, because he had been so busy with the Army and later so ill, he had not been able to spend as much time with Stuart as he would have liked, but he was very happy in the way the boy was developing.

It proved to be an interesting race. There were three entrants — Rolf Harris, Garrick Agnew and Stuart Fowler. At the time the butterfly stroke was a legitimate variant of the breaststroke. Garrick Agnew, a very strongly built boy, who later represented Australia at the 1948 and 1952 Olympics, used the butterfly stroke and went out to an early lead with Harris and Fowler swimming orthodox breaststroke on even terms. By the halfway mark Agnew was well clear and seemed to have the race won, but over the closing stages the gap closed rapidly until the last couple of strokes Stuart surged ahead to win by about two feet from Agnew with Harris away third.

Today Rolf Harris is a household name, Sir Garrick Agnew a power in the world of business and finance and Stuart Fowler the Managing Director of Westpac Banking Corporation.