

Interview with Prof. WA Townsley 1978 Hobart

Interview conducted by John Roberts

What was your path to Chair of Political Science and Public Administration?

I came straight from the Army... the University was an extremely small show then... I had the advantage of seeing a number of the older professors... some had associations with the Uni right back to the 1890s... We would sit together munching sandwiches in the tiny staff room, up at the Domain... Prof Dunbabin used to reminisce, most beautifully... about Oxford... and this was a link to the 'old world' universities and our little university in the Domain in Hobart... and then there was Prof Morris Miller... he was professor of Philosophy, librarian, vice chancellor... he used to tell stories about campaigning with the Liberals in London! It was a very small show then... it always had the reputation of a University... but a very small one. It was very, very, poor because it depended on State funding... and there was a time in the 1930s when the Leg Council passed a motion to abolish it! It survived those times! There were some very distinguished and eccentric professors like TT Flynn, Alan Burn, Prof Pitman, Prof Taylor... all distinguished... but it was a poor state, a poor university!

...after the War?

After the war the Commonwealth Reconstruction Scheme applied to Tasmania... and brought in ex-servicemen for training and education... So many came through in the 1945-46 to 1949 period... and really transformed the nature of the University... and brought a seriousness, and set a good standard... it was a big turning point and had a big impact on students and staff.

The years from 1946 to 1949 were years of dramatic change... until then it was much more leisurely, smaller numbers of people would come, and students were on the whole restricted to teachers in training at Phillip Smith College, and the sons and daughters of the more well to do, going into the professions, like law and medicine.

From that time, there were increasing numbers, and more seriousness.

In the 1950s, there were great expectations, which were not fulfilled... and that caused trouble.

The new staff expected that the new University, at Sandy Bay, would move more quickly, and they expected the State government to respond in terms of salaries and general conditions, and this didn't happen, due to other priorities.

By 1953 the Uni staff were in a state of discontent and ferment. The Chancellor John (Jack) Morris suffered during this time... He had established the State Library, the Department of

Adult Education... he was (perhaps) high-handed... but he took the brunt of the attack by the Uni staff.. the blow-up, which led to the Royal Commission of 1955 took the Chancellor and Council entirely by surprise.

After the Royal Commission, divisions between the staff were accentuated... together with the divisions caused by the Prof. Orr case.

In 1978, is the University better after all that?

Certainly! The Orr case was very tragic... until 1964 the Uni still suffered from staff divisions... the relationship with the Uni and the community is now unquestionably better... In the 1950s there was still a 'town and gown' mentality and differentiation... and the students then only appeared at Commemoration, a riotous affair... and that was the only time that the town got to know the students.

In 1956 I was appointed chair of the Adult Education Board, when Sir John died.