Chapter 2  Anderson and the Youth

As regards students, Anderson contended that the morality of criticism would reject the current talk of their “corruption”. If this “corruption” means a departure from established views on the part of students, then the job of the university is to corrupt the youth.¹

The main reason for being interested in Anderson, after all these years, is the huge impact he had on several generations of students. The power and immediacy of that impact are caught in the most famous account of it, by Donald Horne:

On the day I first arrived at the university I saw Anderson walking along the cloisters in the Quad: someone pointed him out as the Scottish radical who was the university’s main rebel, a renowned atheist, not long ago a communist, censured in the New South Wales Parliament and by the university Senate. Anderson seemed the most important person at the University. When he walked by, my skin might stiffen and my hair prickle at the roots. He was in his forties, very tall, stooped, gangling, striding loosely past in a brown suit and a green hat with an upturned brim, usually sombre, with his pipe jutting out from between his teeth. He seemed an embodiment of what was grave and constant in human suffering, but sometimes he would wave an arm at a student, loosely, as if it were a puppet’s, and smile, strong teeth bursting out beneath his full black moustache. His huge, sad brown eyes seemed to sag right down into his face, pulling the cheeks down with them, lost in wisdom. Sometimes he seemed very tired, both tough and fragile, bearing a great load, but still walking briskly. Then he would laugh, or raise his arm. I was gripped by the need to know him.

Light came into the philosophy lecture theatre, where the Literary Society held its meetings, through leaded glass windows, and on either side of the blackboard there were murals, one of classical and one of modern philosophers. There was the sense of an inner temple about this room when early in term Pritchett and I sat in it to hear Anderson give his annual address to the Literary Society, of which he was president. When he began speaking in an urgent Glaswegian sing-song the room seemed stilled by significance. Most of the time he spoke strongly, but occasionally his voice hovered and fluttered while he stuttered for words, by this hesitation building up a pressure that then burst through into a confident and sustained high note. The style of his address was intensely serious, but lightened now and again with a wisecrack, or with sarcasm … when the discussion was over, he made a triumphant ending, flowing strongly again, correcting errors and confusions and bestowing agreement like a final blessing. It took only an hour, but we felt that we had just witnessed an important new contribution to the theory of aesthetics.  

Horne’s experience, though not universal, was a common one. Peter Coleman, a rather different kind of mind, but one also to be long a follower of Anderson, describes the same scene a few years later, at the end of the War. He was unimpressed with the ambience and decor, but not with the speaker:

On the walls were crude paintings of great philosophers — Plato, Bacon, Descartes and so on. I do not know how many students were turned away from philosophy by this mural kitsch, but at the time I ignored it. A number of dévots walked in, dropping their voices, pocketing pipes. Finally the Master — tall, stooped, pop-eyed, waistcoated — took up his position at the dais and began speaking in a high-pitched, Glaswegian stammer.

He took us on a tour d’horizons, which shocked as much as it fascinated me … I was still not prepared for the full blast of Anderson’s impiety. The world was going downhill fast. It was an age of socialism, religion, communism, rationalism. Abroad President Roosevelt had delivered Central Europe to communist gangsters. In Australia Labor and Liberal parties were both committed to destroying freedom and independence. The Churches and the Rationalists, the universities and newspapers, were all servile to the spirit of the times.  


Anderson is outstanding in Australian academic life for the extraordinary impact he had on students, and the length of time for which his influence lasted. What he proposed to do with the youth, once he had them in his hand, is explained in his early article, ‘Socrates as an educator’.

Socrates did not deny, but rather gloried in the fact, that he had striven by example and precept to inculcate the spirit of criticism, to encourage the questioning of received opinions and traditions; and nothing that the Athenians could do, he declared, would prevent his pursuing this task while he lived. ‘The unexamined life is not worth living’; to lead such a life is to be in the lowest state of ignorance, ignorant even of one’s own ignorance. And therefore he would not cease to call upon the Athenians to give an account of their lives, as the facts of life would compel them to do even if they got rid of him.

The Socratic education begins, then, with the awakening of the mind to the need for criticism, to the uncertainty of the principles by which it supposed itself to be guided ... There is no virtue in being an Athenian, no peculiar and superior Athenian brand of goodness, but goodness is the same wherever it occurs, and what passes as good at Athens may not be really good at all. It requires the most careful scrutiny, and until this process of examination has begun, education has not begun. To see the full force of this criticism, we may substitute Australia for Athens, and imagine Socrates saying, ‘You think there is some virtue in being Australian, and that a good Australian is better than a good Greek or Italian, but what you call goodness is just your own ignorance.’ Clearly such talk would be infuriating, clearly also it would be very hard to answer.

If we are to substitute Australians for Athenians, there are no prizes for guessing who is down to play the role of Socrates. First-year students, who began Philosophy I with Anderson’s lectures on the trial of Socrates, needed no more than the first lecture to pick up the point. ‘Before it was half over I already had the bull by the foot; I was young and foolish, and I was not sure which was Socrates and which was John Anderson. One was short, strikingly ugly, and wore a sort of toga; the other was tall, strikingly handsome, and wore a blue suit.

Detached Australian (Melbourne, 1997), p. 93; P. Anderson, Elwyn Lynn’s Art World (Sydney, 2001), pp. 7–12.
But these differences were superficial. They were great men, and men of the same kind."

Socrates, as everyone knows, is famous for his difficulties with the State, which eventually led to his execution on a charge of corrupting the youth. Every academic since that time who has received criticism from outside the university, especially if it concerns his effect on his students, has taken the earliest opportunity to compare himself to Socrates. Since this motif will recur several times in the present story, it is as well to state at the outset that the charge that Socrates corrupted the youth is absolutely true. The Sophists, Socrates says indignantly, offer the youth knowledge in exchange for money. It would be a lot better, he thinks, if the wise handed on knowledge in exchange for sexual favours. Especially memorable in Plato’s account of the matter is the phrase, ‘philosophical talk which clings more fiercely than a snake when it gets a hold on the soul of a not ill-endowed young man’, suggestive as it is of the real seductiveness of the quid pro quo on offer, to appropriately inclined minds.

Those to whose souls Andersonian philosophical talk clung acquired two gifts. The first was the Andersonian world picture, and the second was a method of argument, especially negative argument. The method of critical argument comes from Socrates, but Anderson’s vision is very different from the one that Socrates had. Socrates, in Anderson’s view, was too sentimental:

That there is in his doctrines a streak of romanticism or mysticism (even though this can often be treated as merely a trimming around a realist or empiricist core) is clear enough from his belief in ‘ultimates’, entities standing above the actual movement of things. This is in striking contrast with the thorough-going objectivism of his predecessor, Heraclitus, who was unremitting in his attack on subjectivist illusions, on the operation of desire or the imagining of things as we should like them to be, as opposed to the operation of understanding or the finding of things (including our own activities) as they positively are, with no granting of a privileged

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7 Symposium 218a.
position in reality to gods, men or molecules, with conflict everywhere and nothing above the battle.  

And Anderson’s style of teaching was eminently suited to recommending so austere a vision. In him, form and content were one. This complex of views is behind the impression of him noted by a visiting philosopher at the Australasian Philosophy Conference in 1951:

As to his ‘atheism’, there is no doubt about this. But when I first saw the man — he was chairing the first meeting of the congress — another observer whispered as he was talking that he was exactly like a Presbyterian clergyman. And so, indeed, he is (there is much more in it than a Scottish accent); though of a type which is now dying out. The leader of some fairly small dissenting Scottish sect, scorning mere ‘conventional religion’, reverencing nothing but his God, dominating his flock and yet honestly appealing for (and sometimes evoking) independence of mind and action. And there are still more definite echoes of Calvinism in his creed. Strict determinism, for one thing. Asked at the congress whether we would have an obligation to assist a wounded man lying before us, he replied that we would have none, except in the sense that we might feel good impulses striving within us with bad; if the good prevailed, we would help the man, and if not, not. He also has a deep and obvious distaste for anything that smacks of the hierarchical, even in quite abstract realms. All facts, for example, are of the same order — there are not ‘deeper’ truths and more superficial ones; what is the case is the case and there’s an end on’t. Professor Ryle, of Oxford, in a recent critical article in the association’s journal, sums up the Andersonian position in the sentence, ‘There are only brass tacks’.

For how this struck students, especially the ones soaking it up as fast as they could, Donald Horne is again the ideal witness:

The first freethinkers I met in the Quad were mere outriders of Andersonianism, but they were such zealots that after I had spent my first afternoon with them I felt skinned. For weeks afterwards I nevertheless subjected myself to their logic and bullying ... 'Ah!' I was learning to say in the Andersonian fashion, 'but what do you mean by that?' Pouncing on a careless phrase and tearing at it for meaning — 'relative terms' were particularly good for this purpose — could jolt almost any conversation to a stop. If definitions were offered it was easy to shoot them down from the hip. Or one could detect a 'confusion' in an opponent's argument, as if pointing to contradictions settled the matter, or restate the argument as a 'position' in terms that made it simple to get rid of. I hoped to become a laconic analyst, clarifying discussion, sorting out confusions, clear-headed, objective ... scientific. But I also enjoyed attack, and the Andersonian weapons seemed irresistibly strong.10

Only Revelation (pamphlet, Newtown, 1960); an Andersonian/Platonist view of religion in G. Stuart Watts, The Revolution of Ideas: Philosophy, Religion and some 'Ultimate Questions' (Sydney, 1982).

10 Horne, Education of Young Donald, 2nd ed, p. 179.
There is a truth about philosophy generally here, not just about Andersonianism. The cast of mind attracted to the subject is especially one that loves the cut and thrust of argument, the tendency to see questions in terms of ‘positions’, ‘confusions’, definitions, refutations. Anyone who fails to understand why logic is central to philosophy has not understood what philosophy is about; Horne’s ‘as if pointing to contradictions settled the matter’ shows he is not going to become a philosopher.

As Horne hints, there was something emotionally difficult, perhaps arid and cruel, in the relentless ‘criticism’ of the Andersonian school. The atmosphere is caught in an unlikely place, a story of conversion to Catholicism. It is by Helen Fowler, an Andersonian student of the early thirties. Like many female students she experienced an emotional antipathy to bullying with logic, but being married to one of the most enthusiastic Andersonians,\(^\text{11}\) she saw it all at close range:

Living, as I did, on the fringe of the circle of Realist philosophers of which the Central Influence of my life was the leader, I knew full well that anyone who had not had the advantage of learning the philosophy we knew could not be supposed to be on our intellectual level.

One knew they couldn’t argue intelligently and that any ideas they had about anything at all must be wrong; if they showed a particular brilliance in any of the arts or sciences we dismissed them as mere technicians, and at the views of other philosophers we simply laughed pityingly. Catholics, however, were away below, at the very bottom of the scale, because in addition to their stupidity they were, as well, vicious and dangerous, for they had at times publicly attacked both the Realist philosophy and its exponents.

All these things I accepted as true, and I tried hard, for the sake of the C.I., to be an earnest Realist; this was, however, a little difficult for me, for I had somehow never really accepted the position, and, what is more, I had just never liked many of the Realists I knew — neither their company, their behaviour, their conversation, their manners nor their moral outlook. Though I laughed when they did, it was often hollow laughter, and though I frowned with them, it was with a conscious contraction of the brows. And this, though I tried hard to conceal it, was, I am sure, apparent to the Realists and but for the C.I., who many times censured

me severely on the matter, I think they would never have tolerated me. And, of course, it was of supreme importance for me to remain in the Realist world, for I knew no other.\textsuperscript{12}

One surprising feature, to those who know academic life, is that Anderson cared what she thought. Coleman rightly comments on how unusual it was that Anderson might speak to one in the Quad to express his disappointment about one’s logic exercise.\textsuperscript{13} It is not a negligible cause of Anderson’s influence.

Things were perhaps happier for those at a little distance from the central turmoil, who had the opportunity to take a small dose of Anderson while experiencing a range of other ideas. It prevented the brain being flooded. One such was John Ward, later Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University and leader of the Vice-Chancellors in their campaign against the Dawkins reforms of the 1980s aimed at making universities more ‘efficient’ and ‘relevant’. ‘It was Anderson’, Ward said, ‘who taught me that academic policy should be criticised and examined systematically’ — but only by those who know what they are talking about, namely, academics.\textsuperscript{14} Another who had the luxury of picking and choosing which Andersonian ideas to take on was John Kerr, who recalled:

\begin{quote}
It was not until I reached university and came to know a number of people who had studied Arts and read Philosophy that I discovered much about the world of ideas and art in its various forms ... Later, whilst at the Bar, I was overcome by a strong desire to experience Anderson as a teacher. He was so obviously a teacher of impressive psychic impact that I felt I should have at least some experience of this. I enrolled as a student, not proceeding to a degree, in Philosophy I in Arts. The subject was logic. I had heard so much about Anderson’s teaching methods that I approached the experience with eagerness and I was not disappointed. I did not sit for the examination at the end of the year and did not attempt to master the subject as taught by him. My desire was simply to listen.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

At an even greater distance were students who were not impressed with Anderson at all. They included, naturally, those who had no interests beyond getting a professional qualification. But there were others.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Coleman, \textit{Memoirs}, pp. 40–1.
\item \textsuperscript{15} J. Kerr, \textit{Matters for Judgement} (2nd ed, South Melbourne, 1988), p. 43.
\end{itemize}
What did it take for an intelligent student not to fall under the spell of Anderson? An interesting case is Gough Whitlam, a student involved in many campus activities in the late 1930s. He attended a few lunchtime lectures by Anderson, but did not need Anderson to persuade him that most Christian and vice-regal rituals were archaic. His family background meant he was not shocked by Anderson’s ideas, in the way that many students from more intellectually sheltered backgrounds were.

He does not remember Anderson saying much about Ethiopia, India or Manchukuo or the Aborigines or Papuans. He believes that Anderson would have understood the University’s motto to mean ‘I may have come to a different hemisphere but I have not changed my ideas’. He found that Anderson was more interested in State politics than Federal politics.

Whitlam is correct about Anderson’s attitude to the notion of changing his ideas merely because of coming to Australia. In an address of 1937 on ‘Australian literature’, Anderson said, ‘There is no more an Australian literature than an Australian philosophy or mathematics. There is a world literature to which Australians contribute.’ In a short piece for a newspaper of about the same time, headed, ‘Is there an Australian philosophy?’ he went further:

It can scarcely be doubted that utilitarianism, the passion for ‘results’ whether it be racing results, athletic or scholastic successes, or the ordinary worldly benefits, is more deeply rooted in the Australian mentality than is the case in communities which have had time to develop a speculative tradition as part of a broad culture ... At present the Australian has much of the mental lethargy of the mere athlete and the schoolboy’s domination by catchphrases. If and when a vigorous philosophy flourishes in the land, it will be the clearest possible sign of national maturity.

Helen Fowler’s piece, especially, draws attention to the question of the moral impact of Anderson’s teaching. His views on ethics were much attacked by clergy and ‘moralists’ everywhere, but what exactly were they? There are two aspects to Anderson’s ethics, both of them unusual, and both arguably having a tendency to deprave and corrupt the youth. The first is that what he takes to be good differs from what other people take to be so. The second is that even when one has decided what is good, that has no impact on what one ought to do. The second of these is perhaps the more amazing, and it is the one he insists on most strenuously:

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16 Author’s text as amended by E.G. Whitlam, 1/5/1995.
The most obstinate confusion obstructing the growth of ethical knowledge lies in the assumption that ethics teaches us how to live or what to live for, that it instructs us in our duty or in the approach to the moral end.¹⁹

It is in fact a standing obstacle to the acceptance of ethics as a positive science that people simply will not be persuaded that, when we say ‘X is good’, we are not urging them to promote X or to exhibit activities of the character X — that there is no more advocacy in our statement than in the statement ‘X is red.’²⁰

The very conceptions of a ‘moral end’ or of ‘intrinsic value’ are, he says, ‘relativist confusions’: there cannot possibly be anything whose very nature means that it is someone’s duty to bring it about. Hence there is no such thing as ‘obligation’:

Historically considered, obligation can only mean constraint or compulsion, and this, it will be admitted, at least frequently prevents instead of promoting goods. It is better, therefore, to drop the term ‘right’ from ethical theory, and it is necessary emphatically to reject the view that goodness has anything to do with obeying commandments.²¹

And there is nothing in what he says elsewhere to qualify the opinion that whatever may be good, its being good does not require any action of anybody. But what then is this ‘good’? ‘We may thus approach a definition of good. Goods, we may say, are those mental activities, or those social activities, which are “free” or enterprising, which exhibit the spirit of enterprise.’²² (‘Free’ is in quotation marks here because Anderson is of course a determinist, believing that all events, including human actions, are causally determined, and that free actions, in any sense that is incompatible with determinism, are therefore impossible.) So what activities, exactly, are ‘free’ and enterprising? No surprises here: ‘Inquiry is the good which I find

myself most frequently taking as an example, and there may be special
reasons for that choice.’

That is not to say that he, Anderson, recommends or advocates that
students, or anyone else, should inquire. Students will catch the habit
of inquiry, or not, depending on their predispositions, and that is all
there is to say about it. Other good activities named are artistic appreci-
ation and creation.

It may be argued that the activities Anderson names are indeed
good, and even that they are goods under-recognised in the general
scheme of ethical training. What is lacking in his view of good is any
sense of the restraint of conscience. ‘Thou shalt not’ is not in it any-
where, as that would be a sign of a ‘servile’ mentality. Anderson was
completely open about his view that conscience is simply part of the
‘fraud of moralism’:

Moralism, the doctrine of conscience and ‘moral necessity’, exemplifies
the natural causality of repressed motives. There are acts which are per-
formed under a sense of obligation, but what they exhibit is not commun-
ication but compulsion. Freud has informed us of the elaborate perfor-
mancess which compulsion-neurotics feel bound to go through. They are
simply ‘the thing to do’; they are ‘right’ but not good, forced, not sponta-
neous. The spontaneous action of a motive seeking its objective cannot be
induced by compulsion. Compulsion can only induce conformity. And
the motives which will incline a man to conform, to do a thing because
he is obliged, are, speaking generally, fear and that desire for self-abase-
ment which, in sexual theory, is called ‘masochism’.

It is natural to ask whether lecturing to the youth about their lack
of moral obligations will cause them to believe, or behave as if, they
have no moral obligations. The link between Andersonian theory and
his students’ behaviour was a direct one, according to David Stove,
an Andersonian student who was to become one of Australia’s best-
known philosophers:

What did strike home to students was the negative side, the critique of
‘moralism’ as he calls it. There he claims to show that there is intellectual
confusion, even inconsistency, in the very idea of moral obligation, i.e. in
the ordinary serious moral use of words like ‘ought’. Whether or not this
thesis is any less incredible than the ‘positive’ one, its effect on students
was simply immense. And, as may easily be imagined, one effect of the


acceptance of such a theory on a student was a sort of paralysis of the active or practical side of his nature."

Stove confessed that his circle of Andersonian students shoplifted under Anderson’s influence. But it was not just the ‘negative’ side of Anderson’s ethics that was a danger. The general tenor of Anderson’s ‘positive’ morality approached the Nietzschean ‘artist is above morality’ stance that Sydney had already seen something of in Norman Lindsay. Manning Clark actually wrote of Lindsay and Anderson as forming a Nietzsche ‘group’, dedicated to attacking Clark’s own bêtes noires, philistinism and puritanism. That is ridiculous, in that there was no connection between Lindsay and Anderson, or their circles. But there is some similarity in their points of view, as well as in the attempts of both to found a one-man classic tradition by cutting themselves off from all developments in their field in the outside world. One of Anderson’s earliest articles attacked the same censorship that made Lindsay a byword.

The important point is that education, properly so-called, is not preceptive or moralistic but aesthetic; only so can it be co-operative and creative ... Seize hold of things, hammer out the issues, abjure dilettantism in any shape. This is the true attitude of the artist, whose mind is superior to the squirming refinements and sensitive shrinkings of the ‘aesthete’, the arbiter elegantiarum, and who permits no ideals or taboos to come between him and a direct handling of the things themselves ... ‘This ought not to be, therefore avoid it’, says the moralist. ‘This is, therefore grasp it,’ says the artist."

And again, ‘freedom in love is the condition of other freedoms ... there can be no culture without it.’

If parents of Anderson’s students had read his works, as few did, they might well have felt moved to institute some activity of inquiry

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themselves. What, for example, was the connection between Andersonian moral theory and his own activities? As the citizens of Hamelin failed to ask about the Pied Piper, was this the man to be trusted with our sons and daughters?

That might depend on what was filling their minds when Anderson’s impact began. A first-year student of 1934, Ruth Walker, recorded some of her earlier daydreams, at Anderson’s request:

The earliest ones ... all deal with a wicked young damsel who goes through a long list of punishments (I decline to give you the details here) and who finally emerges good, purified or what not. Sometimes she runs away from home, comes to a hill, enters therein, and then the fun begins, the hill being a sort of little hell specially provided for such as she ... Most of these dreams are just plain erotic after this. What with Arabian sheikhs (generally dwelling in castles), slaves, captured princesses whose resistance is about on the point of breaking when the tormentor manages to fall in love with them, and so on, and so on.31

In August 1935, Anderson approached Ruth, then a second-year student in philosophy and English, in the Quad, and invited her to his study for ‘a small talk about her essay’. Discussion widened to criticism of the beliefs of Ruth’s mother, a Christian Scientist. During subsequent meetings, Ruth came to accept Anderson’s ideas on religion, communism and free love, and an affair developed. Ruth graduated with First Class honours and the University Medal in Philosophy — Anderson announced the good news: ‘Annuntio vobis magnum gaudium, as the bird said to the Jew’.32 She was appointed a part-time ‘correcting assistant’ in 1937, and a full-time assistant lecturer in 1941, enabling her to afford a flat in which the Professor and his friends could be entertained.

There were naturally some, including herself, who wondered if she had got there solely through her intellectual merits.33 Her professional publications amounted only to a few book reviews on Freudian and similar topics in the Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy (editor, John Anderson), and an article of 1960 explaining some

aspects of Anderson’s logic. There are also two articles by her on Anderson’s influence on students (one entitled ‘Anderson and the student body’) and his involvement in public controversies. Admittedly, the phenomenon of failure of early promise to flower after permanent appointment is common enough in academia, and was particularly evident, according to some, among Anderson’s appointments. As to her teaching, some who remember it name her as the worst lecturer they ever had; others believe the competition for that honour is too fierce but allow that she was a contender. It seems reasonable to conclude on the evidence that Australia’s first woman lecturer in philosophy benefited — if that is the right word — from positive discrimination, before that phrase was current.

Ruth’s continuing affair with Anderson remained the centre of her life. ‘It seems some sort of violation of the soul’, she wrote to him, ‘when you even hypothetically consider our proceeding more lightly.’ In 1950, she suffered a breakdown and, when it became apparent that nursing in the Andersons’ home would not be sufficient to cure it, her family were called in. On medical advice, they admitted her to a hospital for drug and shock treatment. It was successful enough at least to overcome the worst symptoms, which included serious memory loss, delusions, ravings about a pregnancy, and an obsessive fear of betraying Anderson. The other members of the department were organised by Anderson to take over her teaching load and keep quiet about everything. She was able to resume teaching in 1951, and, despite a recurrence of the problem and more shock treatment in 1956, continued teaching until her retirement in 1972. Before her death in 1986, she gave a sum of money towards a collection of essays in honour of Anderson.

It is possible to see after 1950 a greater circumspection in Anderson’s expressed views, but not a change in his position. By that time, a group of Libertarians later called the ‘Push’ had come into being who claimed to be following an Andersonian lifestyle; more of them in Chapter 8, but a Catholic view of 1950 conveys the general trend

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37 Published as *Dialectic* (Newcastle University), number 30 (1987).
2. Anderson and the Youth

Anderson's disciples, Newcastle, 1954.
Seated, John Anderson, A. Bussell, Tom D'Heine, Mike Niven, H., R. Standing, from left.

1954
Niven, D. Heine, Anderson's disciples.
of what was to come: ‘It is notorious that the immoral views Professor Anderson preaches are practised at philosophy conferences at Newport, where the nights are filled with lewd promiscuity, which was justified and rationalised in pseudo-philosophical chatter earlier in the evening. It is notorious that a large number of philosophy students rebel against parental authority, leave home, and live in the back streets of Kings Cross.’ Anderson had no sympathy with any students who drew those conclusions. In a 1951 paper on James Joyce, he rejected the ‘illusion involved in the attempt to lead the untrammelled life, the negative attitude of disbelief traditionally called Libertarianism’, and in another address rejected the suggestion that there was any link between freethought and particular ways of living: ‘There is no need to link views with activities or to say that the holder of certain views must practise certain things. This itself is superstitious and makes it another religion.’ As a meditation on the relation between theory and practice, it is far from the young man who admired Marxism for its close relation of theory to practice: ‘true theory is that in the light of which we transform things, and which we arrive at only by being active.’ None of this, however, is in any sense an act of repentance on his part, as is clear from his remarks on the Orr case, of which also more in the next chapter. Some thought he was playing with fire with his view that ‘Professor Orr’s answer to the question whether a professor who seduced one of this students should be dismissed — “Yes, of course, he should” — seems to me, while it is understandable enough, to confuse the issues ... no evidence was offered that Professor Orr’s work as a teacher had been affected by his relations to any student.’

If there was a lack of knowledge of this darker side of Anderson, there was one sin of his which was well-known, and commented on by everyone. It was that criticism, doled out to all and sundry, was not allowed to apply to himself. That was the case in class, where objections and critical questions were not welcome. ‘I don’t like classes that talk back’, he wrote to an intimate.

42 Anderson to G.F. McIntosh, 28/5/1953, in G.F. McIntosh papers, Mitchell Library MSS 5103.
refusal to engage with new trends in philosophy overseas, which led to Sydney philosophy developing into a small and isolated pond, where grew strange and antique forms no longer found in the open sea. When the leading Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle wrote a rare article discussing Anderson’s views, Anderson claimed not to have bothered to read it, and never replied.

It applied too in appointments to his department, and to the two other departments of philosophy in New South Wales, those in the university colleges at Armidale and Newcastle, where appointments were effectively under his control. Strict toers of the Andersonian line, however second-rate, were preferred to independent thinkers. And even those loyal followers were discouraged from writing expansions of the Andersonian position, lest it be more than a parroting of the revealed truth. All the surveys of the students of Anderson who became well-known in philosophy — David Armstrong, John Passmore, David Stove, John Mackie, Percy Partridge, Eugene Kamenka — have noticed their need to fight their way out of the scorched-earth zone immediately surrounding the great man. No doubt the struggle did them a lot of good, but it may be that the pay-off for Australian philosophy was a long time coming.

In one of the most direct attacks on him by a student in his own lifetime, David Armstrong wrote:

His real intellectual weakness lies in his desire to make disciples, his encouragement of the growth of an Andersonian orthodoxy, his unwillingness to take criticism seriously. By a tragic paradox, his work in arousing in so many students some real feeling for the Western intellectual tradition, and his considerable achievement in the field of pure philosophy, have been largely stultified by his encouragement of an Andersonian provincialism in place of those other provincialisms he so vigorously attacked in the name of culture.  


Anderson even admitted privately, ‘It’s at least an arguable matter how far I’ve produced the sort of provincialism he speaks about, but certainly some of my pupils have little interest in, or ability to tackle, doctrines other than mine.’ But he regarded Armstrong as ‘a chap with whom I should never have got beyond strictly formal relations’ and shared with Ruth Walker the farcical misjudgement, ‘The fact is that both David’s are weak in logic — D.C.Stove, because he doesn’t have the training, D.M.Armstrong, congenitally.’

Still, what was there to Anderson’s influence, beyond mere criticism? What, in the end, was that man for? The secret is in the recollections of Anderson’s best students, those who became the leaders in the next generation of philosophy. According to Partridge,

He was still very young when he came to Sydney: between 1927 and 1937, he was thinking strenuously, still developing his ‘position’. And consequently those of us who studied with him (or later worked with him) had the experience of being associated with a thinker engaged in the work of creating a very impressive intellectual construction ... He commanded few of the usual arts and skills of the ‘good teacher’; he was never popular, spectacular or ‘interesting’. But he was one of the few original and systematic thinkers who have worked in this country (perhaps, in the field of the humanities, the only one). And his closest pupils at least were in touch, therefore, with an ambitious project of intellectual construction going forward: they could observe at first hand what intellectual creation is like.

And David Stove, a student twenty years later than Partridge, and as severe a critic of Anderson as any, wrote:

The influence Anderson exercised was purely, or as purely as a human influence can be, purely intellectual. I never felt anything like the force of his intellect. Disagreeing with Anderson was (to compare it with something most people have experienced), like playing chess against someone altogether above your own class. Your strongest pieces are, you cannot tell how, drained of all their powers, while on his side even pawns can do unheard-of things; and as though by invisible giant fingers, you are quickly crushed ... He was in love with philosophy himself, and he communicated the love of it to others so effectively that many will have it while they live. This is the greatest service he did.


P. Harris, ‘John Anderson’s legacy’, *Quadrant* 43 (12) (Dec 1999): pp. 11–18.
Yet for every person whom he made a philosopher he left ten people, I should say, with a respect for philosophy, and a recollection of what it is like to wrestle in earnest with desperately difficult intellectual questions. This may not sound much, but I think it is much. Whoever can remember what serious thinking is like, is to some extent armed against all the enemies of education. He is armed against the acknowledged leaders of the war against education, the educationists. He is armed against educational levellers of every kind. And he is armed against systems, such as Marxism, which pretend to answer every question out of a little holy catechism, and which just for that reason often act like a revelation on unfurnished minds.

In this way, Anderson leavened the lump of middle-class life in Australia; for, because of him, there is a teacher or a doctor here, a librarian or a lawyer there, who can remember what serious thinking is like.50

A STRANGE postscript to the story of John Anderson was the ‘Bertrand Russell, Andersonian’ affair. Russell was one of the few famous philosophers to actually visit Australia. Though aged 78 at the time, he undertook a gruelling two-month tour of Australia in 1950. A reporter thought he looked like a ‘koala who has just thought of a funny joke’; he in turn thought the Australians ‘cordial but uninteresting’.51 In Sydney, Anderson attended his talk, perhaps the last time Anderson came in contact with a leading overseas philosopher.52 Ideological Melbourne turned on a characteristic performance, with both the Communists and Archbishop Mannix denouncing Russell. Mannix said that the USA had refused Russell entry on account of his immoral views, and Australia should have done the same. The factual part of this was not exactly true, and Russell extracted from Mannix a rare public apology.53

The tour left Russell with an Australian admirer, Anderson’s student Paul Foulkes. Strangely, Foulkes’ connection with Russell appears in one of Anderson’s few recorded dreams:

I wandered into an empty Church and thought I’d like to mount the pulpit and read a ‘lesson’ of some sort, but there were no Bibles around. I wondered if, instead, I’d recite the epilogue to ‘Asolando’ (‘One who never turned his back but marched breast-forward’ etc.) or Henley’s ‘unconquerable soul’, but knew I wasn’t letter-perfect in either. So I went outside and met P. Foulkes who said he had something suitable in his rooms not far away; he dashed off and came back with a volume of *Principia Mathematica*. So my pulpit-reading didn’t come off.²⁴

In 1959 there appeared a handsomely illustrated book, *Wisdom of the West*, by Bertrand Russell. Or more exactly, according to the title page, by ‘Bertrand Russell, [in small print] editor, Paul Foulkes’. It was well received, sold well, and there were at least a dozen transla-

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tions. Reviewers said, ‘This book could not have been written by anybody but Russell ... A certain personal imaginative quality which appears on the page as dry wit is related to a whole humane background, a whole way of life’, and again, ‘written in Russell’s inimitable, clear, and often fascinating style.’ In Australia, however, there were doubts. David Armstrong wrote, ‘Those who are familiar with Andersonian thought will find that topics dealt with, and the views expressed, are often much closer to Anderson than to Russell’; in a review of another book by Russell, he said, ‘A book called *Wisdom of the West* was recently published under his name, although it is clear he had little to do with it.’ ”

David Stove’s review, headed ‘Bertrand Russell, Andersonian’, said:

The oddest thing about the book is that it bears the unmistakable impress of Professor John Anderson of the University of Sydney, under whom Dr Foulkes took his first degree in philosophy. Perhaps Russell was nodding, or needed the money. Anyway, those who know will detect this influence, both in matters of overall emphasis ... and in a hundred points of detail. The most amazing example is the detailed treatment given to a few of the Socratic dialogues of Plato. Those who heard Anderson’s lectures to first-year students on ‘Phaedo’ and the rest will be gratified to learn how very large those lectures bulk in the wisdom of the west.”

Stove and Armstrong were right. Foulkes had written the lot, including the foreword thanking him for his help. Foulkes had visited Russell a few times, by arrangement with the publishers; Russell had made a few minor comments on the text, but it is far from clear whether he had read it all, let alone written any of it. The suggestion that he needed the money was also true, as he had by then three granddaughters to support. The deliberate deception was more on the part of the publishers than Russell himself — Russell urged that Foulkes be given ‘appropriate acknowledgement’ on the title page, and threatened to reveal the truth live on television. But he allowed himself to be fobbed off by the publisher’s reasoning as to why such a gesture would not be opportune, legally desirable, or in accordance with normal publishing practice.

There the matter stood until revealed by research in the Russell archives in 1986. At the time, no notice was taken by the overseas public of the reviews in Australia, and the book was undoubtedly the best-selling work of Australian philosophy up to that date. The only

known reaction to the reviews came from the publishers. They sacked Foulkes.  