

## Letter from Otago

Otago can no longer boast of being the southernmost university in the world, since we have been pipped to that post by the National University of Patagonia San Juan Bosco which operates a small campus in Tierra del Fuego. But the University of Otago still hosts the southernmost *philosophy* department in the world and remains the southernmost university in New Zealand (and hence in Australasia). It is also New Zealand's oldest university. It is situated in Dunedin, in the region of Otago, in the South of New Zealand's South Island. The setting is spectacular - a long inlet surrounded by steep volcanic hills, rising to 600 meters. The city was founded in 1848 by Scots settlers associated with the Free Church of Scotland led by Thomas Burns the clergyman nephew of Robert Burns, the poet. Though originally dedicated to piety and Presbyterianism, Dunedin became a lot more *louche* (as well as a lot more rich) under the influence of a gold rush in the 1860s. There was an influx of non-Scottish immigrants all branded as 'the New Iniquity' by the original Scottish settlers. Nowadays Dunedin is a cosmopolitan city of 124000 though it still retains a distinctly Scottish flavor. The University of Otago (which accounts for 21% of the population) was founded in 1869. Following the colonial custom they hired an ambitious young Scot, the outspoken, 27-year-old Duncan McGregor, to be the foundation professor of Philosophy. Tall, imposing and athletic, with a fondness for Caledonian sports such as tossing the caber, McGregor was an electrifying lecturer with pungent opinions on a variety of topics, combining a go-ahead feminism with a rather ruthless social Darwinism. He resigned in 1886, in the wake of a dispute with the Presbyterian Church and fortified by his fifteen years as a philosopher, went on to become the Inspector-General of Lunatic Asylums. Hoping for a more orthodox successor, the Presbyterians backed another Scot for the chair, a former minister, named William Salmond. But the best laid plans of mice and Presbyterians gang aft agley. The supposedly orthodox Salmond soon published a vigorous polemic, *The Reign of Grace*, criticizing the 'intellectual terrorism' of classical Calvinism whose inhumane and arbitrary deity kept people in existence 'for no reason but to inflict tortures on them through endless ages'. Salmond was tried as a heretic but survived as professor of philosophy until his retirement in 1913. He was followed by another Scot, Francis Dunlop, notable as the owner of a five-ton book-collection and a steam-driven motor-car. But the first professor to win international renown was J.N Findlay who succeeded to the chair in 1934 at the age of 27. Findlay was a South African who had studied at Oxford and Graz. He published one book (*Meinong's Theory of Objects*) and devoted himself, as a teacher, to 'introducing

mathematical logic to the Antipodes'. In this he was remarkably successful, since his most brilliant pupil was the great logician A.N. Prior (1914-1969), the founder of tense logic. In his little book *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (1949) Prior was profuse in his acknowledgements: 'I owe to [Findlay's] teaching, directly or indirectly, all that I know of either Logic or Ethics'. Dunedin is a long way from anywhere else (it's a five hour drive to Christchurch, the next University town) and before the advent of the jet airplane, it must have seemed very remote. Thus Findlay had to work quite hard to keep up to date. He cultivated with a friendship with Karl Popper, then at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, and devoted a Sabbatical to sitting at the feet of Wittgenstein in Cambridge and acting as his official 'stooge', feeding Wittgenstein tough questions when the notoriously long silences became too excruciating.

In 1945 Findlay left for England and was replaced at Otago by D.D Raphael, then aged 29. Raphael's *The Moral Sense* (1947), was published during his time at Otago but he did not stay long and there was an interregnum between his departure in 1947 and the accession of the next professor. In the meantime the flamboyant Denis Grey delivered spell-binding lectures on Plato, though to his talented student Annette Baier (then Annette Stoop) he seemed very exotic, 'straight out of *Brideshead Revisited*', with his exaggerated mannerisms and his penchant for lipstick. John Passmore, who took up the chair in 1950, was a student of the notoriously tough-minded Sydney philosopher John Anderson. Passmore published two books whilst at Otago, *Ralph Cudworth* and *Hume's Intentions*, and worked on his magnum opus, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (1957), a work of such stupendous erudition that it was widely supposed to have been written by a committee. In 1955, Passmore left to be succeeded by another student of Anderson's, J.L. Mackie. Mackie had missed out on the chair of philosophy at Tasmania partly because of his first article 'A Refutation of Morals' (1946), in which he advocated the view for which he subsequently became famous, that moral judgments are fact-stating but false. (His successful rival, a spokesman for the moral verities named Sydney Sparkes Orr, was subsequently dismissed from Tasmania for 'gross moral turpitude'.) In 1959, Mackie left to be replaced by Dan Taylor, a representative of Wittgensteinian Melbourne who was succeeded by Alan Musgrave in 1970. At 29, Alan Musgrave was not the youngest philosophy professor Otago had ever appointed, but after forty years he has had the longest reign. A student of Popper and Lakatos at the LSE, he had already co-edited the academic best-seller, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* when he came to Otago. His chief interests are in epistemology (*Common Sense, Science and Scepticism*) and the Philosophy of Science

(*Essays on Realism and Rationalism*). During the Musgrave era a number of distinguished philosophers have taught at Otago. Some were former students such as Jeremy Waldron , Graham Oddie, and Tim Mulgan whilst others were imported talents such as Pavel Tichy , Greg Currie and Paul Griffiths. The current department has a permanent staff of nine.

So much for the details, but are there any generalizations to be made about philosophy at Otago? Well, for the last seventy years Otago has been very much in the analytic tradition, at least if this is broadly conceived to include both Andersonian Sydney and Popper's LSE. We are, on the whole, an irreligious and naturalistically inclined crew, though godliness is not unknown. As a teaching outfit we have much to boast of over the years, since our graduates include Arthur Prior, Annette Baier, Jeremy Waldron, Graham Oddie and Tim Mulgan. We are currently strong in the philosophy of religion (Greg Dawes), metaphysics (Heather Dyke and Josh Parsons) the philosophy of science (Alan Musgrave and James Maclaurin), ethics, including meta-ethics (Andrew Moore and Charles Pigden) and the philosophy of mathematics (Colin Cheyne). But early modern philosophy has been a persistent preoccupation over the decades, with a special emphasis on Hume and the British Moralists (a fact reflected in the work of some of our best graduates). In 2005 this was recognized by an anonymous donor who gave us a million dollars (matched by the government) to endow a new Professorship of Early Modern Philosophy, a chair currently occupied by the well-known Locke scholar, Peter Anstey. I won't say that our history is entirely untroubled or that we have never had to face political threats. Philosophers are not always popular either with their colleagues or with university bureaucrats. But on the whole our successes have protected us. There is such a thing as academic leadership and Alan Musgrave in particular has helped to create an environment in which a passion for philosophy is taken for granted. I, for one, count myself lucky to have worked here for the last twenty-two years.