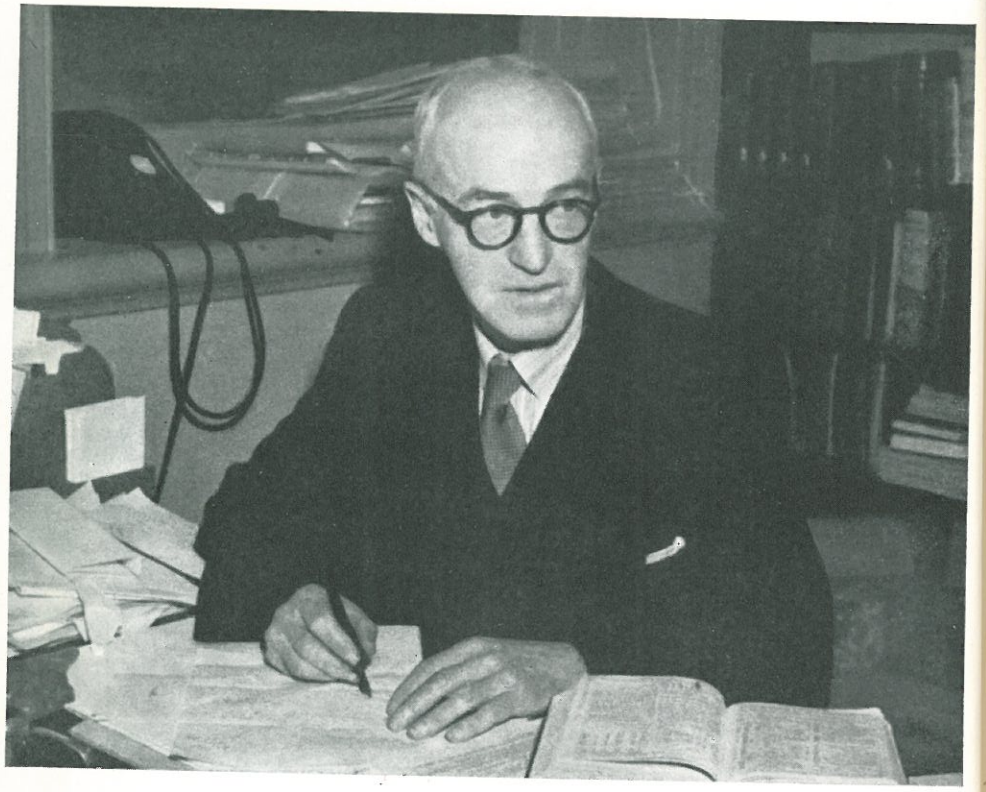


On the Eve of Retirement, 1948

HAPPY HIGHWAYS

G. V. PORTUS

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.

A. E. Housman

MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS

with the guilt of their nineteenth-century predecessors, and this resentment hardens their opposition to every demand of the miners, whom they regard as insatiable. I was interested to observe that mechanization was not then a bone of contention. Each side uttered vague threats about it, but neither the owners nor the men seemed to want it.

Curiously enough, there was not much Marxian propaganda in Cessnock at that time, and what there was of it was not very well-informed. Never once did I hear anyone put the case for the inevitability of communism. Indeed, communism, as a term, was never used. The Russian comrades had not yet appeared to re-popularize it. Socialism was the goal; and socialism was to come as a moral reform rather than as the inevitable historic result of the rake's progress of capitalism. When Marx was mentioned, it was as the author of the labour theory of value; and debates about that theory were startlingly academic, even theological, in tone. I stood on a street corner one evening and listened to the local Member of Parliament—old Bill Kearsley as he was universally called—arguing with a soap-boxer of Marxian sympathies. The controversy centred round the question whether labour really did produce all value, and it was argued as it might have been in a university class-room. Like many of the early British Labour parliamentarians, Kearsley had been a local preacher, and he preferred to base his socialism on "natural rights" and justice rather than on the class war. Later on, however, when I used to visit Cessnock to inspect the town's tutorial class in the nineteen-twenties, I came across some true-blue Marxians of the "scientific socialist" type whose stock-in-trade was the sociology rather than the economics of the Master.

Another thing that surprised me about Cessnock was the lack of enthusiasm for the principles of Consumers' Co-operation. There was a large co-operative store in the town, and most of the miners were members. But their chief interest was in the dividends they might get from it. The deeper social significance of the movement did not seem to grip them at all. I knew several of the members of the committee of management, and their main preoccupation

seemed to be trying to keep the manager up to the mark and the prices down. Considering their turnover, I thought they paid their managers a miserable salary, which may have been why they seemed always to be getting new ones. I had come to Cessnock with the idea that I should try to play some part in the life of the town, apart from the ministry. With this in mind I hinted to some of these committee men that I should give the members a talk or two on the history and principles of co-operation. They assured me, however, that they would not be able to gather an audience for such a project.

Full of enthusiasm, I tried in another direction. I suggested I should give a short series of public lectures on Trade Unionism. We would make a small charge and give the proceeds to the local hospital. Through the good offices of some of my congregation I was put in touch with the local Miners' Lodges. The officials were somewhat sceptical. What did I know of trade unionism? I spouted a bit of Sidney Webb to them, and grudgingly they said they would see what could be done. Nothing was done, so presently I prodded them again. Finally they sent me one of their number as a delegate. They were great on delegates and delegations in that town. This delegate was a burly fellow who had once been a miner, but who had now gone flabby and smelt of booze. He told me the lodges would take my lectures under their patronage on condition that I submitted the text of each lecture in advance for their approval. I was not prepared to do this, but I told him I was ready to have discussion after each lecture in which opposition to anything I had said could be voiced. But he could not be moved. The lodges insisted on censorship in advance. So the scheme fell through. I was pretty certain they hoped it would. Reluctantly I came to the conclusion that this community was not interested in the kind of adult education I could offer.

I had more success with the town cricket team. I resurrected my cricket boots and played with it for two seasons. Only one of that side was a miner. He was a tear-away fast bowler whose deliveries used to come head-high for the first

It was over this third aim that we used to get into hot water. The whole purport of a tutor's lectures might be that change was desirable. Indeed, it was difficult, when surveying society from the political, the economic, the pyschological, or the international points of view, to avoid such an implication. Moreover, no healthy society can be stabilized at a certain stage of development, and thereafter remain static. The degree to which this occurs measures the degree to which that society has become moribund. So that some of us never hesitated to point out the weaknesses and faults in the contemporary social structure. And we hoped to stir the hearts and wills of our students to remedy these things. But at that point we stopped. We were not prepared to specify what particular agency should be employed to carry those wills into effect. We were prepared to discuss with our students the agencies that claimed to be able to do just these things—political parties, churches, communist organizations, social credit movements, single tax leagues and the like. But we deliberately refrained from urging allegiance to any of these schemes upon students. That must be their own decision and their own choice.

Here we encountered criticism. The conservatives of the right complained that we unsettled the minds of our students. We sat in judgment on the existing social system which, they hinted and very often said plainly, was the crown and goal of the ages and part of the order of nature. They resented criticism of an environment which was very satisfactory to them, since it had put them where they were and wanted to be. The more tolerant of our critics from this side said we were "misguided". Others told us roundly that we were "dangerous reds". On the other hand, the communists and the left generally accused us of sitting on the fence, and not having the courage of what they said were our convictions. They wanted the workers to be class conscious, and not open-minded. They told us we were not game to teach Marx. They meant, of course, that we would not lay the doctrines of Marx, of Engels, and of Lenin before our students as an incontrovertible gospel which must not be criticized. They said we did not manufacture revolutionary

zeal. They were wrong in this last contention. We did manufacture quite a bit of revolutionary zeal, but resolutely we refused to harness it to any particular chariot. They called us "wolves in sheep's clothing", "lackeys of the bourgeoisie", and "capitalist hirelings". The word "stooge" was not then current.

All this is symptomatic of the stark social disunity that exists in modern society. I cannot see how it is to be overcome without a far wider extension of adult education in controversial matters than we have hitherto achieved. It certainly will not be overcome by forcing any particular pattern upon citizens, and forbidding them to discuss or criticize it. This seems to me to be the prime error in contemporary fascism and contemporary communism.

Occasionally we met criticism of another kind from educational theorists. They argued that adult minds had passed out of the period of plasticity during which educational processes could profitably operate. They maintained, as our youthful copy books used to teach, that youth is the time for study and improvement, since adults could only learn slowly and with a steadily decreasing capacity. Practical experience with adult students seemed to me to contradict such statements. I had actually watched students in my classes not only increasing their mental content, but also improving their mental power. They were learning how to relate and co-ordinate facts and experience—some of them to a marked degree. But there was an impressive roll of expert opinion on the side of our critics in this matter. John Adams claimed that "the actual processes of education are limited to the earlier portions of life". Nunn maintained that, after the middle twenties, there could be only consolidation and humdrum progress along lines already fixed. William James wrote: "the ideas gained by men before they are twenty-five are practically the only ideas they shall have in their lives". How James could write this, in view of his adoption of the philosophy of pragmatism in his later life, I have never been able to understand.

When we first met these criticisms we could only oppose to them our conviction, based on experience, that adult

seventy-one. I thought I had never seen a healthier-looking old man.

Over and above the charm of his appearance was the charm of his voice—clear, resonant, and with just a touch of a brogue; and the charm of his infectious smile which threw formality to hell and filled the room with ease and cheerfulness. He seemed to smile as much with his eyes as with his lips, and the heavy white tufted eyebrows accentuated the smiling eyes. This, I reflected, is why Bernard Shaw has been able to get away with so much. With such a smile and in such a voice a man could say all sorts of insolent things, even to Prime Ministers and Bishops. In accents like this insolence would sound almost like a caress.

Presently I realized I had begun to fall under the magic of his voice and his personality. He talked on about Ibsen and Pirandello, branching off into anecdotes of Strindberg and Dean Inge. But I roused myself. It was clear that Bernard Shaw was perfectly willing to talk, that he liked talking, and that he would go on talking whatever happened. So I determined to induce him to talk about what I wanted to hear him talk about, and not to let him wander away into whatever path his mercurial mental associations might lead him. The next time he paused, I rushed in.

"I'm afraid I know very little about modern playwrights," I said. "Indeed I feel that I am here under false pretences."

"Why?" he asked, "what's your line?"

"I am an economic historian."

That acted like a charm. His eyes lit up. Evidently I had pressed the right button. Or were all conversational buttons the right ones with Bernard Shaw?

"But that's just like me," he said. "I'm an economist from choice, but I have to write plays for a living."

I asked him to tell me something about English socialism in the 'eighties when he first came to London. Had he known Marx?

"No," he said. "Marx died before I came here. But I heard plenty of anecdotes about him. One of them was about his hats. He had a very large head and he was very proud of it. He used to take strange hats from the hallstands at

the houses he visited, and show the company how they would only sit on the top of his great dome. One evening, however, the hat he had chosen to demonstrate with came right down over his ears. He at once was huffed, and strode out of the house without another word."

"Did you know H. M. Hyndman?" I asked. "He was the leading Marxist of those days in London, wasn't he?"

"I knew him quite well. He persuaded me to come with him to meetings of the Social Democratic Federation where he used to lecture on Marx. They had discussion afterwards. I used to chip in."

"I'll bet you did," I interjected.

"Yes. But whenever I spoke or whatever I said they used to jibe at me for not having read Marx. It was true. I never had read anything Marx had written. Evidently it was something I should have read. So off I went to the British Museum and got out *Das Kapital*."

"That would have been volume I," I said. "Was it translated into English at that time?"

"No. I had to read it in French. It took me over three weeks to read it. Then I went back to the Social Democratic Federation. Hyndman lectured. Discussion began. I joined in. The disciples jeered at me and told me I had not read Marx. I replied that indeed I had read Marx. I had been doing nothing else since I was last there. At this a curious hush descended on the meeting. Heavens! What had I done? Should I not have spoken the Master's name in that off-hand fashion? Then the truth dawned on me. They themselves had not read Marx. In point of fact, Hyndman and I were the only people in all that gathering who had read Marx. I didn't stay long with the Social Democratic Federation after that."

"Then you went to the Fabians?"

"Yes. And I have been with them ever since."

"Mr. Shaw," I said, "in one of your Fabian Essays you wrote that you accepted the Marxian theory of value until you met a criticism of it by Philip Wicksteed which brought you up all standing. I've often wondered what it was."

"Oh, that," he replied. "Did I get it from Wicksteed? I forget. Anyway it was to the effect that Marx had neglected every element that gave value to an article except the labour time embodied in it." Then he sat back, brushed his moustache from his mouth, folded his arms, and began to expound the theory of value based on utility—à la Jevons. And I too sat back—in astonishment and envy. What a professor of economics this man might have been, with his clear, penetrating analysis, his vivid illustrations, and the fluent sweep of argument. How students would have loved it!

But again I roused myself. Time was racing by. I had been granted a quarter of an hour's interview to end at 2.30 p.m. It was now half-past three. The few minutes left were too precious to be devoted to an exposition of the Jevonian theory of value, even if Bernard Shaw happened to be the expositor. So I broke in.

"Mr. Shaw, Jevons and Marx made similar mistakes. They each tried to find value in one element. For Marx it was labour time. For Jevons it was utility. But value does not depend on elements from the side of supply only; nor on elements from the side of demand only. All value is relative."

That sent him racing off into a discussion of relativity. But I stopped him, saying I knew nothing about physics, but I did know of only one thing in all my experience, the value of which was not relative, but absolute. There was only one thing of which we could say it was good in itself, and absolutely valuable. This dogmatic statement, so like many of his own, intrigued him. The light of battle began to shine in his blue eyes.

"And what is that?" he inquired.

"Human affection," I replied. "It is good of itself—always, everywhere."

"Human affection!" he cried. "Human affection! You can't sit there and tell me that. You can't mean it. Why, human affection is the curse of mankind. It's constantly hindering and spoiling useful work. It's not too much to say it's the principal obstruction to progress. Take my own case. All my life I've been the unfortunate recipient of affection from human beings."

"I'm sure you have," I intervened.

"Yes. They have lavished it on me to my constant embarrassment. And what has it done for me? Held me back. Tied my hands. Cumbered my path. All I have ever done I have had to do in spite of human affection!"

He sat back and eyed me impishly. I burst out laughing.

"I don't believe one word of it," I said. "What is more, Mr. Shaw, you don't believe a word of it either. You're only pulling my leg." Then he laughed also; and the American artist joined in as he came round the easel with the finished portrait. We both thought it good. A month later I was to see it in a Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. The artist asked that it should be autographed.

"Put in the date, too," he said, "and put it in as the fourth of July."

"But it's not the fourth of July," remonstrated Shaw. "It's long past that. My birthday is next week, and that's the twenty-sixth."

"That may be," said the artist, "but think what it will mean to the American people to have two momentous documents signed on the fourth of July!"

Shaw cocked an eyebrow at me, winked, and signed and dated the portrait as directed. Then Mrs. Shaw came in and was introduced to me, and was shown the portrait. I apologized for outstaying my time limit.

"Not at all. Not at all," said Shaw. "It's been very interesting." Then turning to his wife, he remarked: "Mr. Portus has been contradicting me."

"That won't do you any harm," she replied. Then he showed me to the door, unlocked the *chevaux de frise* on the staircase, and sent me off with an affectionate message to Gregan MacMahon.

I wandered down three flights of stairs trying to get my breath. So this was Shaw—kindly, provocative, interested in everything, a critic, a philosopher, and an imp. He was then seventy-one. He lived for twenty-three more years, and he retained this impishness to the end. I had been told of his intellectual arrogance. But could anything have been less arrogant than his reception and entertainment of me that afternoon?

changes happen and go on happening? In these modern writings I can find no proof to the contrary. The philosophers of modern communism take us with them to the edge of a chasm which cannot be crossed by reasoning alone. Then, on wings of faith, they float across the gap to that happy ending which their hearts desire. When anyone, who has not this theological approach to social philosophy, points to this gap, he is reviled as a lackey of the bourgeoisie.

In 1918 I had contributed a chapter on the Labour movement for a composite book on Australia edited by Meredith Atkinson. In 1925 I expanded this into a larger chapter for a popular history in five volumes called *The Story of Australia*. In 1926 I wrote the chapter on the Gold Discoveries for the Australian volume of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*. Much of this was new ground for me and I had to spend a lot of time in research in libraries accumulating material. After my return from the United States I wrote a small book, *The American Background*, which Macmillans published. In 1931 I wrote another little book, *Communism and Christianity*, embodying some lectures I had given at an S.C.M. Conference. Then in 1932 came *Australia Since 1606*, a school text on Australian history. This is the only literary work of mine from which I have derived a regular income. It has run to twelve editions in fifteen years, for it has been set as a text in more than one of the States. I had great fun writing it, and conceived the idea of illustrating the text with homely verses and still more homely sketches. Not all the reflections I had gathered about my country's development in writing this book were suitable for youngsters, so I compressed them into a bit of hurricane writing next year which appeared as *Australia: an Economic Interpretation* (1931). This book, which was reviewed as "The Shortest Australian History", ran only to ninety-nine pages of largish print. Apparently it met a need, for the first edition ran out in less than a month. But a second edition exhausted the market, and it has long since been out of print. These books, with half a dozen pamphlets and a good many articles for periodicals and newspapers, make up the tale of my literary endeavour in the years 1918-33.

In 1932 that Prince of Bustlers, Kim (R. W. G.) Mackay, then a Sydney solicitor, but later a Labour M.P. at Westminster, founded the Australian Institute of Political Science (A.I.P.S.). I was brought on to its directorate, and edited the volume that came out of the first conference at Robertson in 1933. Subsequently I attended most of the annual conferences at Canberra, and read papers at two of them, which were afterwards incorporated in their yearly volumes. The A.I.P.S. has done a very good job for Australia. Originally it was sustained by contributions from several banks and private firms; but the tone of the discussions at Canberra became a little radical for these sponsors and the subsidies were withdrawn. Yet the Institute has kept going, and has taken over the production of that exceedingly useful periodical, the *Australian Quarterly*, which is the most comprehensive and interesting of all the Australian magazines.

In the middle nineteen-twenties people in Sydney were becoming interesting in broadcasting. Enthusiastic amateurs used to construct "crystal sets" from a stone ginger-beer bottle, fine wire, and a crystal. We called them "cat's whiskers". And how delighted were these enthusiasts when through their earphones they heard a first faint rumble of words or the ghost of a few bars of music! Several private stations were established, and began to sell sealed wireless sets for the reception of the programmes they put on the air. Purchasers of such sets could listen to one particular programme, but to no others.

I made my bow to the microphone early in 1929 at one of these private stations. Stewart of the W.E.A. had arranged for a series of five-minute talks to be given at this station as part of his advertising campaign for the new classes of that year. Two of these fell to my lot. After the second I was asked by the manager if I would let him know of any other people at the University who would be willing to talk on the air. I asked him whether I was to approach potential talkers on a business basis, and what would be the fee offered. He professed astonishment. "Fee," he said, "why men like Sir Oliver Lodge are only too glad to speak on the air." We were in a room which was divided from a studio next door

to be special prayers for the successful outcome of the Disarmament Conference then being held in London. The sermon was duly preached, in the presence of the then Governor of the State (Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven) and a large congregation, of which my wife was a member. Being unknown, she hoped, on the way out, to overhear some comment on the preacher. On the piazza outside the west door she saw two men talking earnestly. She sidled towards them as one was saying: "It was brilliant, wasn't it?" The other replied: "Yes, but not only brilliant. It was so sound all through." This, thought Eth, is what I want to hear. So she sidled closer. Then she discovered that they were talking about Bradman's innings the day before at the Oval! La la! Olla podrida indeed.

During my seventeen years as Director of Tutorial Classes I blossomed into authorship. We were constantly being reproached by the left wingers because we did not teach Marx. Therefore I decided to take a tutorial class in that subject. Although I had a fair acquaintance with the left wing socialist movement, I knew very little of the actual background of Marx. So I spent the best part of two years of not very abundant leisure in getting up the subject. I read dozens of commentaries and pamphlets as well as the whole three stout volumes of *Das Kapital*. This work, which is supposed to be the bible of the working classes, has suffered the fate of most bibles in that it is not read by those who claim to follow its gospel. In spite of the taunts of our critics, I did not gather a large class in response to my invitation to study Marx with me. The original enrolment did not reach twenty, of whom about a dozen remained to the end of the twenty-four lectures. They were enthusiastic and highly critical, but they were by no means all wage workers. Among the faithful were a highly placed civil servant, a retired consulting engineer, a parson, and three teachers (one of them a woman). For the greater part of the course we stuck on the Marxian theory of value and surplus value, hurling texts from the Master at each others heads. From the point of view of lively discussion, it was the best class I ever had. We sat

round a table with volumes of *Capital* in front of us, exactly like a Bible class. One evening I had been lecturing for five minutes when I was interrupted by one of my students. The rest of that period—one hour and fifty-five minutes—went in discussion. My students were far more interested in Marx's economics than in his sociology. I do not think they would be now. It was difficult to get a text-book suitable for class use. The available short expositions were either violently anti-Marx, or just as violently pro-Marx. Moreover, most of them were out of date, having been written before the First World War and the Russian Revolution. To meet this need I later gathered together my lectures and compressed them into a small book, *Marx and Modern Thought*, which was published in 1921. More copies I fear were bought by university students in economics than by members of the Labour movement. But the book found its way across the world. I had critiques from Canada, the United States, and Britain, and it got honourable mention in the preface of the little work on Marx written by A. D. Lindsay (the Master of Balliol) in 1925.

Nowadays the literature of Marxism has grown to enormous dimensions. A school of Marxian metaphysicians and philosophers has arisen who write at great length about dialectics and materialism as a philosophy, and quote the jargon of contemporary physics and mathematics. They are at pains to prove that change is inevitable and that everything is in a flux—social forms included. Having established this (which philosophy and sociology have always been willing to admit), they go on to claim that this succession of dialectic changes will lead to a classless society. Thereafter, apparently, the process of change will cease. Dialectics, having completed its work, will go out of action. But why? "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Marx and Engels began their *Communist Manifesto* in 1847 with this statement. If this is a sound reflection on social evolution, why is the future of the race going to contradict its past by coming at last to a static New Jerusalem in which class-conscious revolutionaries cease from struggling and dialectics are at rest? Why will not still further

him. He lived a good deal in those earlier years, and used to quote Horace Lamb and William Bragg to us as examples of what Adelaide might do if we really took off our coats. He was then seventy-three, but he seemed to me to be no older than when I first met him twenty years earlier. He had a considerable reputation as a philosopher in the outside world, and is the only Australian scholar who has been invited to give the Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen. But he ranged over many fields and I have come across few men to equal him in all-round learning. Of course he had his idiosyncrasies. He would not dictate his letters to a stenographer. He never would have a room of his own at the University. He sat in the Registrar's room, on one side of the Registrar's table. This meant that one normally interviewed him in the presence of the Registrar. When I had anything of a private nature to say to him, I had to get him to come to my room, or else I went to his home in the evenings. Despite his acumen and wisdom he could be very exasperating. But I grew very fond of him, and I shall always count it a great privilege to have known him and to have enjoyed his friendship. Another bond between us was that he was the uncle of Alec Ross, the crack Rugby full-back whom I had coached and whom I had often selected for New South Wales and Australian teams.

There was a pleasant atmosphere at Adelaide. When I joined the staff there were only eighteen professors. In such a small band there was no room for the cliquism that had developed among the forty-seven professors I had left behind at Sydney. There was, of course, plenty of difference in outlook among us, but this did not hinder our fellowship.

During my first year in Adelaide I gave, at the request of the W.E.A., a public lecture on "What Marx did for Socialism". It was, as the title implied, an exposition of the work of Marx. A member of the local Parliament who happened to be in the audience wrote to the University complaining that I was a Marxist. He added that I ought to be silenced, and that, unless something was done about it, he would bring the matter up in Parliament when the

University estimates were next under consideration. The Registrar, in great concern, brought the letter to me and wanted to know what I was going to do about it. I wrote him a letter to read to the Council in which I said the writer was in error, and that I could not understand why he had not realized that my lecture had been expository and not propagandist. I offered the text of my lecture for perusal, and suggested that the threat of reducing the University subsidy might safely be left to the Council to handle. In still greater concern the Registrar came to remonstrate with me about the tone of my letter. He warned me that "we could not quarrel with our bread and butter". I replied that I did not propose to alter what I had written.

When the original letter was read at the next meeting of the Council, the Chancellor (Sir George Murray) immediately took up the matter. He said the University could not dream of telling its professors what they had to say or not to say on any question. Having been appointed, professors were free to express their opinions and views, and must not be muzzled. Would somebody please move that the letter be received?

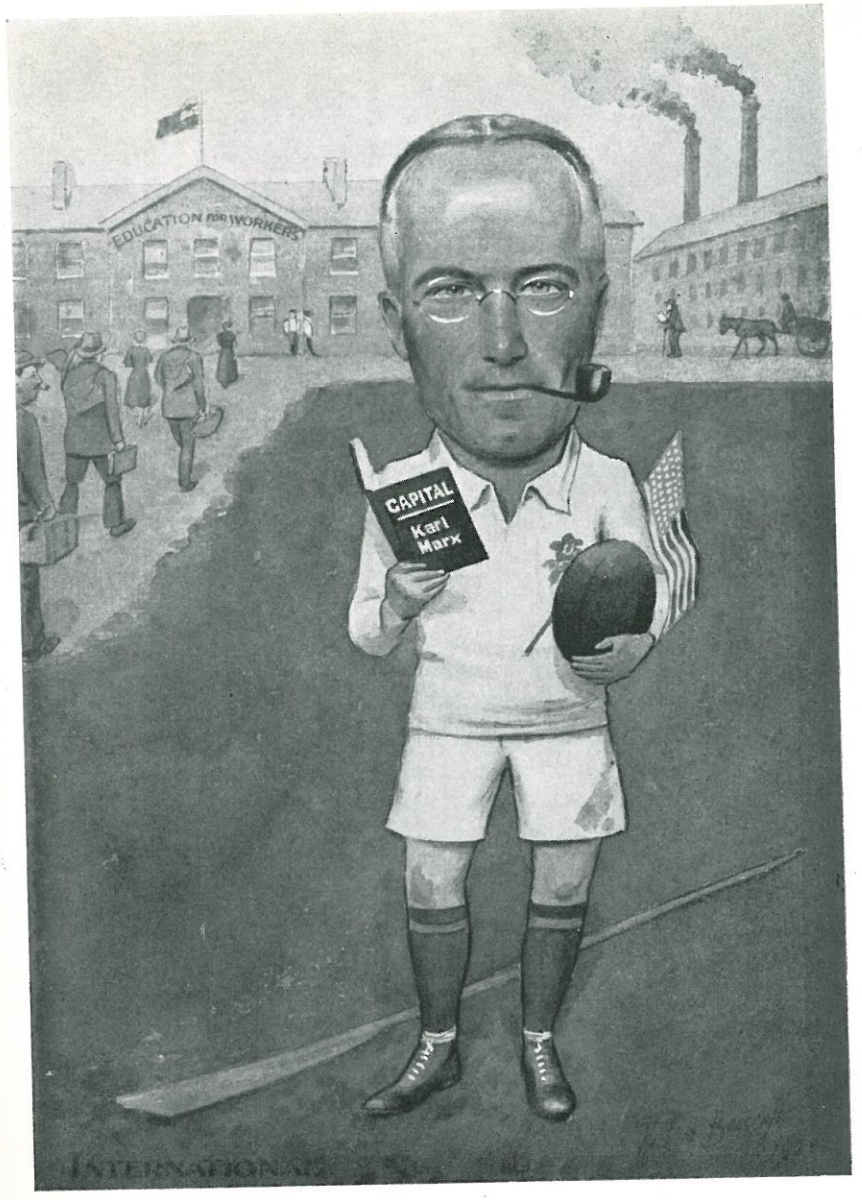
So the affair ended. It gave me considerable satisfaction to be assured of academic freedom in this way so early in my professoriate, but, as I was to learn afterwards, this was just the line that Murray might be expected to take in matters of this kind. He was a genuine liberal in outlook, and the University of Adelaide was very fortunate to have him as its Chancellor.

The life of a university professor is exceedingly untrammelled. He pleases himself about the quantity and quality of the work he does more than any other professional worker I know of. His lectures may be the fruit of careful preparation, or they may be brilliant improvisations, or just tiresome repetitions. But no one calls him to task. His students may be irked. But they can only air their dissatisfaction among themselves. This, and absenting themselves from his lectures as much as they dare, are their only means of protest. This "professor's freehold" is one of the things that is

in reading the sixth chapter of Revelation, he once referred to "the souls under the table". My own attitude was determined by two considerations. I was not a high churchman. I managed to introduce a little dignity into the ritual of the services, but I did not press for a cross on the altar, and I refrained from crossing myself in the pulpit. Such practices, though seemly enough, were not so close to my heart that I wanted to insist on them when I knew they would disturb some of the best people I had. On the other hand I deplored the blatant protestantism that expressed itself in violent animosity to Roman Catholics, and I wanted to detach my people from this attitude. I used the word "Anglican" instead of "Protestant" when referring to ourselves. I carefully kept away from criticism of any of the other denominations. I went out of my way to meet and greet the Roman priest—a delicate little man of Italian stock with whom I remained on very good terms all through my sojourn in the town. We always lifted our hats to each other.

Presently I had cause to congratulate myself on this policy, for a most unholy sectarian row broke out in the town. The local Presbyterian minister was a rabid Orangeman, and at some Orange festival he preached a bitter sermon against Roman Catholicism. He was also a pretty shrewd man of business and owned a block of shares in the new picture theatre that had been built, "with all mod. cons.", in the main street. Next Sunday morning in the Roman Church the word went round quietly that the faithful would do well to refrain from attending this cinema. Immediately the box office receipts dropped most depressingly. The other shareholders naturally did not welcome this. But the little priest was adamant. Not until he had been shown, in a lawyer's office, the signed transfer of shares, and had seen a sworn declaration that the Presbyterian parson had no longer any interest in the venture would he withdraw the ban.

Fortunately I was able to keep my people entirely apart from this row. But it is an ill wind that blows good to nobody. One of my parishioners was an enterprising chap named Voysey, a jeweller by trade, who had a small shop



G.V.P., 1929

Cartoon by Herbert Beecroft