

**Tribute to the late Professor Alan Gilbert AO (1944-2010)
by Dr Donald Markwell, Warden of Rhodes House, Oxford,
at the University of Manchester,
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By personality and by profession – as a historian, as a profoundly persuasive, inspiring and often mesmerizing speaker, and as a leader of successive institutions - Alan Gilbert was a story-teller, a teller of stories both about the past and about the future. He used the unexpected fact, the unexpected - even provocative - turn of phrase, the engaging way of looking at a problem and opportunities, to illustrate a theme and to draw us in, and to draw more out of us and of our universities than most of us believed possible. One of his attributes of leadership – helping to make him one of Australia’s greatest modern vice-chancellors - was that, for each institution which he led, he had a narrative – a narrative of how a brilliant or at least a better future could be created that grew out of the institution’s past and its present potential, and that met the challenges and opportunities of the future, which Prophet-like he foresaw with clarity, even when he wasn’t always right.

It was my immense privilege to see these and other aspects of Alan’s dazzling and at times almost ethereal personality and leadership when he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, from 1996 to 2004. I served as Warden of Trinity College within that University from 1997 until after Alan had left Melbourne to come here to Manchester. Alan was extraordinarily, inexplicably kind to me personally, and I am more grateful than I can say.

As perhaps you know, Alan was born on September 11, 1944, in Brisbane, Queensland – the city, though then more a large town, in which I grew up many years later. Educated in Canberra, Alan earned a Bachelor’s and a Master’s degree at the Australian National University. His Master’s thesis in 1967 was concerned with Australia’s Conscription Referenda of 1916-17, a rich and resonant topic. More importantly, in 1967, he married Ingrid, to whom – and to Michelle and Fiona - our hearts go out.

One of those who taught Alan at the Australian National University, one of Australia’s best known if not best historians, Manning Clark, wrote in his

memoir, *The Quest for Grace*, published in 1990, of the lively and stimulating students he had taught at ANU. He recalled Alan Gilbert as 'a young man of prodigious industry' and 'a shrewd observer of the human scene'.

Manning Clark also remembered Alan as a refugee from God. Like Clark himself, Alan had grown up in a deeply religious family. When I once asked Alan why he had specialised in the history of religion, he replied simply: 'comparative advantage'. When I looked puzzled, he explained that most historians had little understanding of religion, but he, given his highly religious upbringing, had an advantage. There could be few disciplines more rooted in the traditional humanities than the history of religion. Perhaps it says something about Alan that, even in explaining his choice of this as a career, he put it in the language of economics and strategy.

After lecturing for two years at the University of Papua New Guinea, Alan went on a scholarship to Nuffield College, Oxford, where in 1973 he completed his doctoral thesis on the growth and decline of Nonconformity in England and Wales in the early 19th century. His subsequent major publications made a significant contribution to the social history of British religious practice and secularization, including using statistical analysis of religious practice in pioneering ways. He later also served as general editor of a series of volumes on Australians at different points in history.

From 1973 to 1991, Alan Gilbert made a distinguished career as a historian and, increasingly, as an academic leader in the University of New South Wales, including at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. In 1991, he became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Tasmania, and in 1996 Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne.

In these positions, Alan Gilbert showed a remarkable capacity for visionary leadership, grounded in profoundly international, historical, and strategic perspectives; great resilience; and 'grace under pressure'. For a very painful and sustained stretch of months, he was being pummelled daily, and unfairly, in a Melbourne newspaper for one of his strategic initiatives, Melbourne University Private. Some of those working closely with him were amazed that he was able to put all this into strategic perspective – presenting it as a phase that had to be endured to achieve what had to be done to make private sources of revenue for leading universities as acceptable in Australia as in, for example, the United States. I said to him that I wondered how, in the face of all the pressure he was under, he maintained his equanimity. 'It's all acting', he

said. A person of deep integrity, Alan was also a great actor – performing the theatre of leadership with apparent aplomb, concealing personal vulnerability in the interests of his institution. In all this, in good times and in bad, he was sustained by the love of his wife, Ingrid, and of his family – and, I always suspected, by his gruelling regimen of treadmill exercise.

At the University of Tasmania, amongst much else - from a new institutional structure, a new campus, new scholarships, and renewed alumni and community engagement - Alan successfully presided over the merger of the University and the Tasmanian State Institute of Technology. At the University of Melbourne, he developed a vision and a plan – the Melbourne Agenda – for making that university one of the finest universities in the world. These are easy words for vice-chancellors to utter, as so many do; but with Alan, you knew that he meant it, he knew what it meant, and he had the strategic plan to make the greatest strides possible towards that goal. For example, he knew that Melbourne needed to become a genuinely national – as well as local and international – university, and he initiated the brilliant Melbourne Scholarship program which has done so much to draw to Melbourne outstanding students from all parts of Australia. It will not surprise you that he also placed emphasis on recruiting Nobel Laureates. How poignant that he did not live to see Manchester’s own announced.

Almost as soon as Alan had started at the University of Melbourne, major tightening of the public finances – somewhat like that announced in Britain today – commenced. Committed to a great future for the University and for universities, Alan responded - not by cutting the traditional heartland of the University, the arts and science faculties, as happened in many places – but by developing strategies for generating the revenue needed for sustained and in fact improved quality. Over many years, Alan had been and continued to be one of the clearest and most compelling advocates of policy reform and deregulation to enable Australia’s universities to do this, including through student fees combined with loans and equity measures. This, he argued, was essential if any Australian universities were to be genuinely internationally competitive at the highest levels. He was unafraid to deploy market forces to promote high-quality education.

With many other colleagues, I worked closely with Alan on building up the contribution of international students to the revenue of the University, as well as to its intellectual capital, its international orientation, and its cultural diversity. We did not persuade Alan to give much emphasis to seeking

philanthropic support for the University – though, for example, a major private benefaction made possible the landmark Bio21 development. Among more entrepreneurial strategies which Alan pioneered was the sale of educational services through a new entity, Melbourne University Private, which was later modified and, in changed circumstances, brought to an end. To encourage the international linkages and aspirations he knew were so crucial, Alan initiated a global network of high-calibre universities, Universitas 21, and through it U21 Global, a provider of online courses, as a revenue strategy based on optimism about the early growth of demand for what we were then starting to call e-education. To house some of his initiatives, Alan envisioned a massive building program, breaking out of the traditional confines of the campus and developing a truly impressive new precinct of buildings around the adjacent University Square. One of these buildings fittingly bears Alan's name.

While very much an entrepreneur, a future-oriented strategist, an innovator, a moderniser, a lateral thinker, an ambitious and focussed benchmarker, a talent spotter, and a builder of the new, Alan was also a traditional scholar – and an educational leader who gave deep and creative thought to the problem of how to uphold traditional academic values and quality when the traditional campus-based university was seemingly being challenged by an 'information revolution', and at a time when public funding was clearly inadequate to provide for the highest standards of university education.

In a public lecture in 1997, Alan expressed his strong commitment to what he called 'the campus-based learning community' of personal interactions, informal as well as formal. But he also referred to the likely development of global 'virtual universities', offering high-quality on-line distance education, competing strongly with such traditional campus-based universities. He continued, and I quote:

To survive in such a world, traditional campus-based universities ... will have to offer students all the benefits that the best 'virtual' alternatives can muster - and much more besides! The so-called 'information super-highway' will have to run through the teaching and learning heart of every great campus, and the students will have to be as much at home in cyberspace as are their counterparts in the 'virtual university'. ... Without that, no value-adding based on face-to-face, human interactions of a spatial learning community will be sufficient to save it from the emerging competition; with it, the intellectual, social and cultural rewards of campus life are likely still to create the best learning environment of all.

Not only was Alan committed to creating 'the best learning environment of all' and to high-quality teaching, he was himself by nature a teacher. The academic teaching his students in the university classroom became the academic leader teaching us all, teaching the university, the university and the community his classroom. Like so many others, I learnt so much from him. The lesson is sadly over, long before its time, but we are, I think, all of us still learning, and forever grateful.