
Recollections of
Kenneth Thorne
Henderson

by his daughter,
Margaret

Acknowledgements

It would have been a daunting task to attempt a biographical sketch of my father, had I not had access to two valuable studies, on which I have freely drawn.

About ten years ago, while researching the history of Trinity Grammar School, Kew, Dr Robert Trumble became interested in the Henderson boys who were foundation scholars, and particularly in Kenneth, the eldest. I made a number of sources available, and in 1988 he published a short biography of Kenneth Thorne Henderson, subtitled 'Broadcaster of the Word'. Robert Trumble contributed greatly to the Music Department of the Australian Broadcasting Commission and had access to its archives, but was not directly associated with my father .

Then in 1991 I was approached by Dr Alison Healey of Sydney, who was doing her doctoral thesis on "Religious Broadcasting on ABC Radio 1941-91". She became interested in Kenneth Henderson as a pioneer in that field, and, to quote her "a man whose personality combined many fine qualities, a radical faithfulness, a passion for truth, a perceptive and sensitive humanity, intellectual energy and creative practicality".

Under the heading of "Nerve and Imagination" she contributed a very scholarly article on Kenneth Henderson to St Mark's Review for Summer 1992.

In November 1991 Paul Collins of the ABC put to air a program to commemorate 50 years of religious broadcasting and co-incidentally 100 years since my father's birth. I am indebted to Kay McLennan for making his scripts available.

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1. *Early Years*

My father was born in 1891, an Australian of the third generation on his father's side and the fourth on his mother's. His father was an estate agent and valuer, who, after the early struggles and hardship of the 90's founded the Melbourne firm of George G Henderson, and incidentally reported on rowing for the Argus. He came of a large Roman Catholic family and as a boy sang in St Patrick's choir, but his religious allegiance was not proof against the determination of his wife, to resist priestly intrusion and rear her children in the Church of England. She was born Jessie Isobel Dowdell to a Tasmanian ship-owner, who suffered some maritime disasters, so that Jessie Isobel came to Melbourne to earn her living as a governess. She had a handsome and commanding presence, a strong personality and an intense concern for social justice, later to earn her a CBE. She was a powerful influence in the character and career of her first-born son.

He had three brothers, Rupert, Alan and Wilton, who died of appendicitis aged eight, and two younger sisters, Melanie and Lynette. Kenneth was a studious child whose family nickname was 'Prof'.

I think the years before World War I in Australia were a halcyon age to grow up in. The young had great freedom, pleasures were simple, there was no true affluence but also no greatly competitive pressure. The future seemed assured.

The Henderson boys went first to Hawthorn Grammar, and in 1903 were enrolled as foundation scholars in the new school of Trinity Grammar, founded in the parish hall of Holy Trinity, Kew, with George Merrick Long as headmaster. He was the next strong influence on Kenneth, who grew up with the school and thus had no difficulty in being Dux for four years in succession. The family was then living in Harcourt Street on the corner of Burke Road, and the boys went to school by pony cart. "Polly" the pony was an important member of the family. There was no shortage of open space around the school for Polly to graze during the day. The school moved to Henty House in 1906. In the course of time Kenneth was to be editor of the school magazine, Head Prefect, recipient of the Rhodes Prize and an officer in the Cadet Corps. His sport was rowing.

Kenneth met Sharlie Tickell at a party when he was fourteen and she was six months younger. Teenage social life of that era revolved around dances in the Kew Rec., tennis at Auburn Heights and on private grass courts, musical evenings and holidays at Upper Beaconsfield or on Swan Island. Captain Tickell was Commandant of the Victorian Navy and his batman was quite happy to put up tents and look after the boats for the young people.

Sharlie was fair, blue-eyed, lively and determined, a good dancer and tennis-player and not academically inclined. She saw her future quite clearly from an early age - they both did - so she put in a year at the Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy. Her younger sisters qualified in Architecture and Massage.

Kenneth entered Trinity College in the University of Melbourne studying English and Philosophy for an honours degree. He didn't entirely enjoy the rough and tumble of college life. According to a somewhat ambivalent reference from Leeper he "led a blameless life", but I believe he crossed swords with the Warden over the latter's tardiness in coming good with scholarship allowances. In the University he was considerably influenced by Walter Murdoch and Boyce Gibson. He was pipped by Ned Herring for the Rhodes Scholarship. He graduated in 1912 MA and Dip.Ed. with an honours thesis in Social Psychology. His ultimate intention was to take Holy Orders.

2. *Work*

In 1913 with the support of his old headmaster, Canon Long, he was appointed first headmaster of an entirely new school in Sydney, Trinity Grammar School, Dulwich Hill. This was the brainchild and vision of Bishop Chambers, and started, as did the Kew School, in the Parish Hall. It grew rapidly from zero to sixty boys, including twelve to fourteen boarders. Chambers was relentlessly ambitious for the school, but it was chronically short of funds and staff. Kenneth's salary was two hundred pounds a year.

For Kenneth this was a disastrous venture. He was just twenty-one, with no administrative and little teaching experience, removed from his family and friends and in particular from Sharlie with whom he corresponded daily. Their parents thought them too young and too financially insecure to marry. Kenneth felt unable to continue at Dulwich Hill after the first year. He returned to Melbourne to prepare for ordination and to do some teaching at Melbourne Grammar School and the University.

In December 1914 he was ordained deacon and appointed assistant chaplain at Melbourne Grammar School. At last they were able to contemplate matrimony.

3. *Marriage and War*

Sharlie and Kenneth were married by Canon Sutton at Holy Trinity, Kew in January 1915, and had a short ecstatic honeymoon at St Fillan's, near Healesville.

It was a momentous year of war. His brothers Alan and Rupert had enlisted in the 7th Battalion AIF under Lieutenant Colonel "Pompey" Elliott and had already left for Egypt and Gallipoli. Alan, a lieutenant of twenty, was seriously injured at the landing; he died during evacuation and was buried at sea. Rupert, aged twenty-two and a Captain, was killed in action in May on Cape Helles "shortly after taking command of the remnants of the 6th and 7th Battalions at the conclusion of the charge of the 2nd Brigade".

The loss was quite devastating for Kenneth and his parents. For the rest of his life he retained a sense of commitment to his brothers, and a consciousness of the Communion of Saints. Maybe the birth of the first child in November 1915 signalled some future hope.

Kenneth was ordained at St Paul's Cathedral in December 1915, and in March of 1916 commissioned as a chaplain in the First AIF and posted to France. Writing to his mother from the troopship he expresses his misgivings about leaving his parents at that time, but felt that the call to war service was irresistible.

In the 46th Battalion, on horseback and on foot, he experienced the mud and blood of the Somme - chiefly in casualty clearing stations with some unauthorised visits to the front lines. He was deeply impressed and moved with the courage, humour and resilience of the ordinary soldier and embodied his experiences in *Khaki and Cassock*, a book published in 1919 - I think a sort of catharsis. It was illustrated by Napier Waller. It is a moving and very honest account of the life and problems of an Army chaplain, who was social worker, counsellor and censor as well as priest and confidant. He became vividly aware of the lack of communication between the established churches and the average man in the trenches. He realised that the only way to bring the Christian message home to them was by sharing their fears and hardships in a very simple and practical way.

France took considerable toll of his health. His digestive tract reacted unkindly to army diet as well as to the emotional and physical demands of the job. He was invalided to the UK in March 1918 and while on sick leave taught at Winchester for a few months. He found England immensely attractive, even in war-time.

He returned to Melbourne at the end of 1918 to his wife and two daughters. He weighed about eight stone and in this day and age would have been labelled as "post-traumatic stress disorder".

He was however more fortunate than many other returned men in finding a job with a house to live in. He was appointed Assistant Chaplain to St. Peter's College, Adelaide and we lived happily in a cottage in the school grounds, a

cottage which now houses the school archives. He got on well with Canon Bickersteth, the Headmaster, and the next four years largely restored his health, added another daughter and a son to the family and produced two books - *Khaki and Cassock* and *Christian Tradition and Australian Outlook*. This was a small book incorporating a young man's experience of his era and his vision for a future. Considering his experience of life to that date it has a remarkably sanguine outlook, sustained by faith in the possibilities of life in the Spirit.

Life in Adelaide was essentially tranquil. My father was a kindly, somewhat abstracted figure. given to reading at meal-times and meditatively rolling bread-pellets. He really did not relate too well to young children; it is quite significant that he dedicated *Christian Tradition* to "My Wife, who, by striving ceaselessly to keep three babies out of my study, made this little book possible". He was, however, deeply concerned that his children have the love, security and educational opportunities for their personal fulfilment.

Sharlie and he had a wonderful working relationship to the end of his days. My mother had an active inventive and practical mind which complemented his contemplative and analytical approach to life. She was a good cook and gardener, but not much interested in housework or sewing. She became an excellent spinner and weaver during and after the Second World War.

It was she who mended the fuses, and packed the books on their frequent moves, and she who bought and drove the only family car in 1937. Kenneth never learnt to drive. They were sufficiently at ease with one another to enjoy an argument. and although she was often critical of the Anglican Church her Christian faith remained central to her life.

After five years Kenneth was restless and ambitious and found Adelaide "the deadest of dead ends". He wanted the overseas degree and experience at that time needful for promotion in the scholastic or ecclesiastical worlds. He petitioned his father for financial aid. Our maternal grandmother was prepared to look after the three girls in Kew, so he set sail for Oxford with his wife and two-year-old son.

He was later to refer to his two years in Oxford as the happiest of his life. He was attached to Hereford, and his thesis was on Ernest Troeltsch. a German theologian concerned with the social and psychological tenets of the Christian gospel. But the chief values in Oxford were in the personal contacts with liberal churchmen and philosophers. prepared to challenge traditional doctrines. He was greatly influenced by Henry Major, CH Dodd, BH Streeter, CJ Webb and Friedrich von Hugel. The practical outcome was an Oxford B.Litt; he missed out on a PhD which would have required more time for a preliminary Oxford MA.

They returned to Melbourne in May 1925 and the support of his family became a real issue. He was without job or home, bursting with ideas and idealism. He hoped for something in the academic world or in theological teaching, but the cupboard was bare. As he tells it. he arrived back in Melbourne at the time of an Anglican Church Congress at which there was some discussion of Modernism. His notes read "five minutes of outspokenness - no job available". He was virtually disqualified by his Modern Churchmanship.

He applied for many jobs. including a headmastership in Perth - many years later the retired headmaster of Christ Church Grammar School returned to him a reference from the Archbishop of Melbourne: "Dear Mr Parry, Mr Henderson is doing very well here in the work of assisting with the Fund for the Cathedral Spires, as Deputy Organiser, which requires tact, and he is managing the work well. His academic qualifications are well known to you. I think it only fair to say that he is a quite definite Modern Churchman, and there should be an understanding on that point". Signed + Melbourne.

It would be hard to imagine a less efficient fund-raiser, or a more equivocal testimonial, and my father was never remarkable for tact.

Mainly I think through the good offices of Walter Murdoch. who was also a contributor, he was able to supplement this meagre income with a weekly column in the *Argus*. These articles dealt mainly with topics of theological or philosophical interest. There was a series on the Psalms and one on Old Testament prophets. It was a road into journalism.

Murdoch was passed over at Melbourne University, to our great loss. and went to Western Australia as Professor of English in the small but vital young University. In 1928 Kenneth was offered and accepted the post of leader-writer on the West Australian newspaper. He was to stay there until 1941.

4. Journalism

The paper was, and still is, the only morning news-sheet in the West. It had no close political affiliation, and the Editor, Lambert, was a liberal and fair-minded man with whom Kenneth could happily work. It was the era of the Great Depression - of unemployment and salary cuts and very great hardship in the wheat-growing areas, then the community's main resource. Possibly poverty was a bit easier to take in the predominantly young society with lots of sun and outdoor activities and no ostentatious wealth. We took kindly to the swimming and the sport and were well-taught at Presbyterian Ladies College, but the working hours of a morning print journalist meant that Kenneth didn't see a great deal of his children, except on holidays. He and Sharlie made some good friends, in particular Fred Alexander, the professor of economics and his wife Greta, and Christopher Storrs, then Archdeacon of Northam and later to be Bishop of Grafton. The very fine annual University Service was the fruit of collaboration between Kenneth and Christopher, under the aegis of the Student Christian Movement. They were both leading figures in the SCM as were Burgmann and Moyes in the 'thirties. Annual conferences were enlivened by Christopher's musical and liturgical skills, Burgie's controversial socialism, and Kenneth's lively limericks and quirky humour.

His leading articles covered the whole range of political, economic and social issues, but he wrote also scholarly reviews for a number of periodicals, such as the *Morpeth Review* and the *Modern Churchman*. In a letter to his father he complains that he had "a measly two guineas for a twelve-page article".

He had a wide-ranging correspondence and I believe he never discarded a letter, or even an illegible jotting on the back of an envelope. I speak as an Executor. There are letters from his Oxford friends, and from people as varied as Naomi Mitchison, the socialist writer, Maude Royden and a young German scholar, Karl-Heinz Pfeffer who visited Australia and was probably a member of the Nazi party. He read voraciously in international affairs and social issues but always had a "who-done-it" on hand as well as the Times Literary Supplement. He was a fair tennis-player and he pursued golf as a fervent but frustrated player. Interstate and overseas visitors came to stay - I remember CF Andrews, the friend of Gandhi, among others.

In 1939 Longman's published a small book of prayers for all occasions, entitled *Prayers of Citizenship*. These were very well received by his friends in the UK and also in Australia. There are three letters from the programme division of the BBC written late '39 and one I would like to quote:

"Very soon after I sent my last letter to you on August 9th, the most serious international crisis was upon us and we had to adjust our daily services and make special provision for evening intercession services for our listeners.

"In these daily services, both morning and evening, I have ventured occasionally to use phrases or longer passages from the prayers which suddenly became so relevant and appropriate."

Letters from England at this time bring home very vividly the early months of the War in London, particularly one from the Rev Roy Lee who was incumbent of St Martin in the Fields. He was an Australian-Chinese priest from Sydney and a scholar of Freud and later Vicar of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford. He was another outstanding churchman lost to the Australian scene.

Kenneth wrote a great number of prayers to meet the needs of himself and others. I have made use of some in intercessions but find they need editing for modern use - they are a bit long, and as one bishop said tend to confuse preaching with praying.

5. *Broadcasting - the ABC*

Daily journalism in war-time had particular tensions - between the known facts of the cables and what information could safely be publicised. Even in 1939 he wrote to his father that “he was very tired of waiting up for Hitler” so that in 1941 he viewed favourably an approach by Richard Boyer to join the Talks Department of the ABC. He saw in this an opportunity to put across Australia-wide and to a new audience his ideas on life, work and religion. It meant a transfer to Sydney, leaving my mother’s newly-built house in Swanbourne.

He was initially appointed as Special Talks Officer to work on Post-War Reconstruction and his views went to air in a series entitled “Tomorrow’s World”. In 1943 he was charged with the administration of Religious Broadcasts; it became a separate section in 1946 and autonomous in 1949. That would mean he had his own budget, which according to John Munro he worked out on the back of an envelope. It was, John says, “nearly always right”! The ABC published his pamphlet on *Broadcasting as a Religious Opportunity* for circulation to contributors and clergy.

He felt very much at home in the ABC and his ideas were on the same wavelength as those of the Chairman, Richard Boyer. I quote Alison Healey:

“The Commission was concerned that Australia should become a critical, independent, informed and vital democracy and saw itself having a significant role to play in this. Expressed most basically the ABC’s task was to improve society. Henderson saw around him the fundamental challenge of spiritual disruption and moral decline. The compelling work was to revive people’s faith in God and each other, to restore their confidence in goodwill as a principle that will work in a big way, and to discover the life of the Spirit that makes life worth living”.

This thinking was behind the Sunday evening series “Plain Christianity - a word to the wayfarer” which started in 1947 and ran for twenty-two years.

He realised that the great majority of his listeners were not church-goers but had some concern for fundamental values and spiritual life. They did not require fireworks from the pulpit but appreciated a reasoned exploration of ideas. He auditioned and trained his speakers and deleted the bombastic and pretentious. This made him some enemies. At the time Divine Service on Sunday morning was shared among the denominations according to the census figures. He had little time for the “fringe bodies” such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Assemblies of God and the charismatics. To quote Dr Healy again:

“Under his guidance, ABC religious broadcasting acquired substance and form, clarity of intention and a spirit of service to Australian society that has continued over fifty years.

“When he left in 1956, the ABC was putting thirty-three religious programs to air in a typical week, totalling some eight hours broadcasting”.

Among those programs, "Readings from the Bible" for three to five minutes each weekday ran for forty-three years. The readers were carefully selected. The Daily Devotional for thirty-five years called on a wide range of speakers - I recall that one was Sr Julian of the Community of the Holy Name. "Facing the Week" was a Monday morning program; Community Hymn Singing on Sunday evening for thirty-seven years came from parish churches all over Australia; Evening Meditation was for forty years a short late-night program. On Sunday evening there was "Prelude" and "The Epilogue". This last followed a BBC format of readings and music, and he took some recorded programs from Britain before developing the local successor. He recruited the Adelaide Singers and George Tracy's Melbourne group, the Westminster Madrigals, both noted for their excellent diction. On Tracy's suggestion he auditioned the St John's Fellowship choir (later the Canterbury Fellowship) under Peter Chapman. We made a number of recordings, but we were only one of many choirs in parish churches and cathedrals around Australia. It became a prestigious engagement; the program undeniably raised standards of choral singing, and put new life into liturgical music.

An immense amount of interviewing and personal contact was required for these diverse programs, involving much interstate travel. It was stimulating but tiring work.

The Ecumenical Movement was dear to his heart, and he rejoiced in meeting with world leaders in all denominations at Lund in Sweden in 1952 and Evanston in USA in 1954, where he represented the Australian Church. Dr Healey credits the Religious Department of the ABC with being the single most important agent promoting this spirit of community nationwide.

In '53 Kenneth was joined by Dr John Munro, who took over production of radio programs in the southern states. They became very close friends, which made for a smooth and happy change-over when Kenneth retired in 1956 at the age of 65. Television was in the wings and Kenneth preferred to leave the new techniques to the younger man.

The Australian College of Theology had in 1955 conferred on him an honorary doctorate.

6. *Retirement*

He retired formally in '56. He had no superannuation, having joined the ABC at the age of fifty, but he continued part-time work for the Department up till the eve of his death in 1965.

He appraised scripts, briefed speakers and contributed to the "Frontier" program set up by John Munro. This was a spur to his continued reading and interviewing. He conducted the Going-Home prayers in St Paul's Cathedral at 5.30 on week-days, and assisted with the services of the Canterbury Fellowship in Trinity College Chapel. He and Sharlie made many friends in the Fellowship, not least Dr Max Thomas and Elaine and Mr George Mitchell.

But in those last years he was chiefly concerned with writing, revising and re-revising a treatise on "The Reconciling of Men at Work". This is still in manuscript form as he failed to find a willing publisher. It encapsulated his views on social and industrial harmony and could well have been a philosophy and theology for Consensus and the Accord twenty years later. It is some consolation that much of the material had already found its way on air or into print.

Kenneth and Sharlie went overseas on his retirement. Their son had qualified in Dentistry in Sydney after the war and followed many of his contemporaries into the National Health Service in Britain, where he married and begat five sons. They were living south of London. The grandparents made their headquarters in South Kensington and renewed old friendships. After a trip to Spain Kenneth became very ill with an obscure infection from which he made a slow and incomplete recovery. They returned by sea to Sydney and came to live with me in Parkville in 1958. It was found that his pituitary gland was functioning poorly. His energy and enjoyment of life improved greatly with appropriate supplements. Angina stopped him mowing the lawn, but he continued to play gentle golf on the little Parkville course, and to write and record until two days before his death at seventy-three from a stroke and heart attack. He had a great triumphant funeral service in Trinity College chapel, conducted by Dr Max Thomas with full benefit of choir. My mother was to live a very independent and active life in Parkville for a further twenty-three years.

7. Conclusion

I would like to conclude with part of a tribute from John Munro, submitted for the commemorative broadcast in 1991 :

“The degree of co-operation he got from all varieties of religious outlook was remarkable. Of course he was an ecumenist before it became fashionable to be so. While ever a loyal priest of the Church of England he had the capacity to stand in other’s shoes, as it were, and charitably to help them to express themselves even when he held a conflicting viewpoint. He never argued for victory but always sought for truth.

Kenneth Henderson was a great man, a great son of liberal persuasions within the historic Anglican Communion, a prophet, priest and pastor, “whose praise is in all the churches”, a creative public servant, a man of affairs and pre-eminently a man of prayer.”

I could add “he was also a son, a husband and a father”.

MMH

Parkville, 1996