


Hugh Stretton (15 July 1924–18 July 2015)

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Hugh Stretton was a remarkable man in many ways. He was a Rhodes Scholar, going straight from service in the Australian navy to Oxford without a preliminary undergraduate degree in an Australian university. (His application had the support of Robert Menzies who said of him in a 1945 reference ‘as being of rare intelligence, with marked capacity for acquiring knowledge in an orderly way. He has an interesting combination of solidity and humour’.)

Shortly after completing his Oxford degree and his appointment to Balliol College, Hugh worked closely with Thomas Balogh editing much of his work. Hugh took up a Chair in History at Adelaide University in 1954 which he resigned from in 1968 to take up a Readership to give himself the opportunity of undertaking research.

I was fortunate to run across his path when he was a Visiting Fellow in the History Department of the Research School of Social Science (RSSH) at the Australian National University (ANU) in 1966. He was just completing his first major book *The Political Sciences* and had a little time to spare. While at the ANU, he lived in a housing complex owned by the ANU to house short-term appointees and post-graduate scholars and their families. The development was in one of the new planned suburbs being developed in Canberra as it rapidly grew to accommodate the massive increase in population that followed the increase in Commonwealth powers.

The National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), a highly competent agency, created in the mid-1950s to design and deliver Canberra as a fully planned city was in full flight. It was a natural experiment that Hugh was able to study ‘close up’.

The RSSH had in 1965 created the Urban Research Unit whose first staff arrived in 1966. The Unit had been created out of the initiative of Noel Butlin whose own research into the economic history of Australia indicated that the development of urban Australia was more important than had been thought.

Hugh was interested to closely examine the theories and practices pursued in Canberra’s development and sought advice about the operations of the NCDC. I admit to being overwhelmed by his attention but introduced him to senior officers in the NCDC who were pleased to provide information and discuss ideas with him.

The publication of his *The Political Sciences* in 1969 was followed by a remarkable response. All the discipline based seminar programmes in the RSSH and the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPacS) were suspended and the two schools held a joint series of seminars to discuss his book and what it might mean for their own work. It was a challenging and stimulating experience for all scholars.

Following the publication of *Ideas for Australian Cities* in 1970, published by Hugh as an ‘orphan book’, the Urban Research Unit suspended its regular seminar programme replacing it with a series of seminars on Hugh’s book.

These responses to Hugh’s scholarship were affirmation of his work and a significant measure of his impact on scholarship generally but on urban matters in particular. I can remember no other occasion in my 35 years in RSSS when any other scholar so gripped the attention of all scholars in that School.

I have a treasured memory of Hugh trundling down the Coombs Building Corridors flogging his ‘orphan book’ and knocking on doors to sell it. I bought 20 copies and gave them away to scholars and colleagues because I believed that it would change the way they thought about cities. The book was subsequently published by a ‘real’ publishing house and went on to great success. In the early 1970s, it was used in interviews being held to recruit staff for the Department of Urban and Regional Development by asking candidates ‘What do you think of Stretton’s *Ideas for Australian Cities*?’. We were not asking people to find out whether they agreed but whether they were interested enough in urban issues to have an informed view on them. When I ordered 20 copies for the Department and was told there was need for only one copy, I insisted saying I wanted everyone to read it and be informed by views that had helped shape the Government’s views on urban policy. It was typical of Hugh that all profits from his ‘orphan’ book and the royalties of all subsequent editions were given to a charity whose work for the poor he supported.

Hugh’s subsequent works on cities and related issues were ‘devoured’ by planners and planning students. He was one of the earliest scholars to escape the narrow confines and prejudices of more traditional disciplines. He understood and contributed to debates over economic issues and was acutely aware of the importance of politics in decisions. He was one of the earliest to recognise the importance of considering the impact on the natural environment of the way we organise our economic activities and the pressure they place on it.

He was more aware than most of the need to change attitudes to the rights and needs of women and consistently supported budding female scholars.

In all this, Hugh was a generous and modest man. His generosity was experienced by many of his students whom he encouraged to expand their horizons and some to whom he provided financial help. His attention to and provision of detailed constructive comment on their work in response to young scholars became legendary.

The following extract is from one of his students who became a respected historian himself and now enjoys a senior appointment:

... a wonderfully generous man in every way. Three things stand out for me. One is the letter he once wrote to me explaining why a draft chapter I’d submitted for a book on Australian Cities was not every good, and showing me how it could be much, much better, all the while providing a firm but encouraging steer towards writing in ways that made the ideas accessible to everyone (essentially, less wank and showing off, more focus on genuine alternatives and concrete suggestions). That one letter – and the praise he sent me after reading the painstaking revision I then undertook – probably did more to shape my approach to writing than any other intervention. The second was the speech he gave at the launch of my first book in 1995; with hardly an academic in sight but in front of my family and more than fifty local people who

featured in the words. It was a masterpiece of academic speaking that created genuine warmth and enjoyment among the people who were there. He also repeated the phrase he had begun to use by that time: that we had sadly shifted from governments that had hard heads and soft hearts to governments that had soft heads and hard hearts.

Hugh was also modest in a way that few are. He was always the first to congratulate and support other scholars including the younger among them. He was a little embarrassed by the regard with which he was held and was at times overwhelmed by the attention of others.

He made his mark in the 'real world' with equal felicity. His role as a member of the South Australian Housing Trust and on the short-lived Australian Housing Corporation revealed his deep understanding of the way bureaucracies worked and how he could help them become at once more efficient and yet more compassionate and alive to the needs and ambitions of 'ordinary folk'.

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Books by Hugh Stretton

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