

**26****“A degree from the University of Tasmania isn't worth a cracker!”**

On matriculating, Oscar's first preference was to study music, but at that time the University of Tasmania had no music degree. He decided to study mathematics instead, with minors in physics and chemistry. He needed financial support, which Walter provided by paying Oscar's fees and a small living allowance, though the terms were stricter than a modern-day HECS loan: Walter was to be repaid in full on graduating.

Oscar had just turned seventeen when he entered first year in 1921. After being stifled in Scottsdale, in Hobart and at university he kicked over the traces a little. His first attendance at a graduation ceremony was marked by an incident that became notorious. A group of students – Oscar denied he was one of them but his unapologetic glee in relating the story suggested otherwise – collected cats, placing each one in a sugar bag. They smuggled them into the back of the hall while the Chancellor was solemnly making his speech. Each student had a swab of cottonwool soaked in turpentine. At a given signal, each released his cat, dabbing its arse with turpentine as it flew out of the bag. The cruelly maddened cats ripped around the hall like furry, squealing rockets, while the pranksters quickly took their departure in the pandemonium. They went to the nearest pub to celebrate their cleverness, Oscar amongst them. On his way home on a double-decker tram, Oscar related that he had to climb down the front stairs into the driver's section.

‘Hey, you can't come down 'ere!’ the trammie shouted.

‘I'm afraid I must,’ Oscar replied, green of face, ‘I'm about to...’

And did, through the driver's open door.

Like his great-grandfather Abraham, who shamefacedly admitted ‘I have been but once intoxicated and then but partially so, and under very peculiar circumstances...’, Oscar also claimed that he had been but once intoxicated and that this was the occasion, in circumstance that also might rightfully be deemed peculiar. Unlike Abraham, however, Oscar had not been ‘but partially so’; he'd been well and truly sloshed.

Whether his youthful high spirits had anything to do with it or whether he had simply taken on too much – he had enrolled in five subjects in first year when four was the norm – his first year results were not good. He passed only two subjects, failing Physics and both Pure and Applied Maths. The maths results were not unusual. The newly appointed and very young Professor of Mathematics, E. A. Pitman, was said to use the Fifty Percent Rule: fail half the class automatically. Oscar was usually in the wrong half. This was a bitter blow, not only to his pride but to his father's, and eventually his own, pocket.

The following year Oscar's pranks got him into real trouble. Physics I, in which Oscar had failed, had been taught by Professor Alex McAulay. McAulay's son, Leicester, was appointed Lecturer in Physics and he taught Physics 1 in his father's stead the following year.

*Return to Van Diemen's Land: Oscar*

Orientation Week, before lectures started, was given over to the usual student games, demonstrations and a review. Smarting from his failure in Physics, Oscar wrote and performed a sketch for a student production, precursor to the Old Nick Company's Uni Review. He called his item 'Leicester McAulay's Goat', after a popular song, 'Paddy McGinty's Goat'. Oscar's version made some unflattering points about the drinking habits of Leicester's 'goat', this being, of course, the new lecturer's father. The audience enjoyed it immensely; Leicester did not. He strode up to Oscar, still seated at the piano, and hissed into his ear: 'I'll never forgive you for that, Biggs.' His lack of forgiveness manifested itself in a straight forward way: he failed Oscar, year after year.

If that wasn't discouraging enough, the accumulating financial consequences were serious. Oscar took on part-time work to hold the debt to his father in check, which meant less time for study: more failure, more debt. In 1925, the gods took pity: McAulay was not examining and Oscar finally passed Physics I.

1927 was an extraordinarily busy year for Oscar, caused in large part by his academic misfortunes. He was under financial pressure to repay his debt to his father. He lived at Simpson's Boarding House on New Town Road, part paying for his board by working two days a week for Pa Simpson as a joiner, whose son Jack was a good friend of Oscar's. Oscar was bashing away at his last two university subjects; he taught mathematics at night at the Hobart Technical College; he spent hours a week trying to keep his erratic T-Ford in running order; he read between one and four novels a week; and he was assistant organist and choirmaster at St. David's Cathedral, where his friend John Scott-Power was organist. He frequently gave recitals on piano and organ, and accompanied singers and instrumentalists at recitals. He commented on some of these performances in a laconic manner: 'JT's top notes like tearing a piece of rag', 'I wish B. would *sing* the note, not wobble around it,' 'SP had all reeds blaring, couldn't hear a word the choir was singing', '*Jesu Joy* dragged', 'JSB's Little G Minor P&F just bonzer.'<sup>1</sup>

I know all this because Oscar kept diaries, in which he carefully recorded details of his daily doings. Unfortunately, his wife Ella had a strong sense of privacy and when he died she burnt them all, except that for 1927, which somehow survived. That diary gives a detailed picture of Oscar's life in that year.

Like great-grandfather Abraham he meticulously detailed costs, but lacked his ancestor's fulsome verbosity. Much of the diary is taken up with his wretched T-Ford:

Bus vile... Bus missing (misfiring)...Bus bonzer. . . Bus rotten. Ball-race (10/3d.)

Killed dog by NH (North Hobart football) ground. Dinner. Fitted horn.

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach's Prelude and Fugue in G Minor, BWV 578.

*Return to Van Diemen's Land: Oscar*

Mass 8 a.m. Smash. Echlin, Chapel St. G'orchy at St. J. Ave. Turned his Morris-Cowley over. Mrs. E. broke 2 ribs. Walked home. Got Max. Steering bent... (27<sup>th</sup> November, 1927)

Major Echlin, the driver of the Morris-Cowley, was furious at the accident. Convinced it was Oscar's fault, Echlin made sure Oscar was charged with negligent driving. Oscar was in turn outraged at Echlin, whose first reaction after the impact was to clamber out of his overturned Morris and walk around it, wringing his hands, moaning, 'Oh my poor car, *my poor car!*' while inside lay Mrs. Echlin, moaning a different moan as a result of her broken ribs. That smash caused a life-long enmity between Echlin and Oscar. Much later, when both were members of the Anglican establishment in Hobart, there was much unholy glaring, sniffing and head-tossing when they encountered each other at meetings.

November and December of 1927 must have been close to hell for Oscar. He was running the exams for the Tech boys, was sitting his own exams and not doing well at all – and he'd smashed his T-Ford. A couple of weeks before Christmas:

ploughed in Pure (Maths). Left cam-shaft (rear) bearing with Vic. Home. Cop with summons - negligent driving. (12<sup>th</sup> December, 1927).

Next, he lost his job at the Technical College. There is mention of an exchange of letters with Ellis, the Principal of the Technical College, but Oscar does not record the details. He applied for jobs in WA, NSW and Victoria, using a 'wonderful' reference from his friend and mentor H. D. Erwin, but these applications were unsuccessful.

The T-Ford was back on the road soon after the smash, but he'd had enough of that unreliable heap: 'never again with Ford' he confided to his diary. Fortunately, the previous September he had bought 'a busted Citroen' for £25. His grandfather Alfred seemed to inhabit him in many ways. In this instance, it was tinkering with machines, perhaps because, like Alfred, it distracted him from his other woes. Be that as it may, he stolidly rebuilt the Citroen:

Red-inked Citroen circuit-diagram. Letters from Mum and Dad. Sympathy over exams. M's bonzer letter. Fitted Citroen timing cover and cleaned distrib. Ground valves. Lunch. Cyl wall base gaskets. Aft. tea. Parcel of sweets from Lil. Cut gasks for differential. Dinner. Dorothy (Simpson) being funny with my ribs. Nearly threw my chair at her. Win 7: (she) bonzer re exams. Picked and stoned cherries until 9.30. Pete ate tarantula. (14<sup>th</sup> November, 1927)

In 1927 he had only two subjects to complete his degree, Pure Maths III and Applied Maths III. The examining of Applied Maths was shared with someone Oscar admired very much – H.D. Erwin, a teacher at Hutchins School. Erwin confided to Oscar that Pitman intended to fail him in both subjects, despite doing well in Erwin's section. Oscar recorded in his diary:

Letter from Erwin (69%). Bastard (29%). Turned 2 chisel handles, one for Jo. (2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1927)

*Return to Van Diemen's Land: Oscar*

Despite Erwin's mark, Bastard had failed him yet again, though his fantasies about what he would do with the other chisel handle might have provided some solace. Oscar was allowed a supplementary exam in Applied, which he passed, but not in Pure III; he had to sit his final subject again the following year. He finally graduated B.Sc. at the 1929 ceremony, after eight long years of frustrating study.

Oscar was convinced Pitman had had it in for him, but did not know why. It is possible that Pitman disapproved of Oscar's irreverence to his revered colleague, Alex McAulay. Such an attitude would be in keeping with Pitman's stern self-righteousness, for he, too, was a pillar of the Anglican Church, a situation that, as with Major Echlin, led to not a few unchristian encounters.

Many years later, in the early 'fifties when Oscar was teaching at Hutchins School, Pitman's daughters, Jane and Mary, attended his classes in matriculation Maths, Physics and Chemistry, these subjects not being available at Collegiate, Hutchins' sister school. Their younger brother Ted was a Hutchins boy, who also took maths and science under Oscar. Oscar regarded the Pitman children as amongst the brightest students he'd ever taught, and treated them kindly and respectfully.

Any sins of the father were not visited on the father's children. Nor were the sins of his own father visited on his children.

In 1935 the University of Tasmania finally offered a Bachelor of Music, a full-time four year degree under Dr. W. Arundel Orchard, previously Director of the NSW Conservatorium of Music. Although he was a full-time teacher and organist at Holy Trinity Church, Oscar enrolled, along with three or four other students. Only two went through to the final year, each with Distinctions in some subjects: Oscar and Jesse Wakefield – now Jessie Luckman.

Jesse was, and wondrously still is in 2009, an influential member of the Tasmanian music scene. In her nineties, and still in good health, Jesse explained to me why, seventy years previously, Oscar didn't graduate after doing so well. A requirement in the final year was a large composition (a cantata for chorus and orchestra), or several small ones (a string quartet and songs). But when Jesse and Oscar arrived in the final year, Orchard insisted they do only the cantata. Oscar had already started on his string quartet and songs and refused to submit anything else. In his history of the University, Richard Davis comments: 'Dr. Orchard seems to have been too demanding for local candidates of the period, and the course evaporated on his return to Sydney in 1939.'<sup>2</sup> Two students, Oscar and Jesse, however, reached the final year without a failure; the problem was that Orchard had arbitrarily changed the rules at the last minute.

Oscar's sister Blanche asked him why he didn't finish his Mus. B. His reply no doubt also reflected his experiences with McAulay and Pitman: 'They can all go to hell. A degree from the University of Tasmania isn't worth a cracker.'

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, Richard. *Open to Talent: The Centenary History of the University of Tasmania, 1890-1990*. Hobart: University of Tasmania, 1992, p. 77.