

Reminiscences of Past Graduates – Early 1970s

This Special Issue has been written as an extension to the necessarily brief article which was prepared for the School of Physics Alumni Newsletter, No. 6.

Prologue

Peter Price was a remarkable student in every sense of the word. An illustration of this occurred when, whilst a second-year student, he was asking a third-year about Quantum Mechanics. When the third-year suggested he should read Dirac for himself, he promptly did this and then started sitting in on the third-year Quantum Mechanics lectures mid-term and even sat the exam in the subject, signing his paper ‘Anonymous’. Peter was not only a brilliant student but he also ‘got involved’ enthusiastically in everything that was happening about him. In addition, he was sufficiently confident of his knowledge and abilities that he never hesitated to confront colleagues and staff members with discussion and advice.

In connection with writing the History of the Physics Department, I asked Peter to write down some of his reminiscences, and what follows is a selection of those which relate to group activities. His full reminiscences, which illustrate more fully the characteristics I have mentioned above, will be reproduced elsewhere in the History of the Department. However, I believe that the following is a good illustration of the constructive camaraderie which has existed between honours, postgrads and staff within this Department throughout its history.

John Robins

Selected Reminiscences of Peter Price (PhD 1976)

In February 1968, after completing 1st year at ANU on an NUS scholarship, I came to see Prof Alan Boyle about getting credit for my ANU 1st year physics courses. [This was granted and Peter was enrolled at UWA as a 2nd Year student in 1968.]

In the 1969 May holidays Frank van Kann, Jon Silic and I drove Frank's Datsun 1600 non-stop (4 hour shifts) to Sydney. We were on our way to the 1969 NSFA (National Science Faculties Association, sometimes known as the National SFA) Conference in Brisbane. This was a science students' conference, with lots of informative general science lectures during the day (eg philosophy of quantum mechanics, after which I castigated the uninformed philosophy lecturer), and unmentionable but generally harmless goings on at night. We stopped in Sydney for 3 days to pick up Frank's girlfriend (and future wife) Marveena, then drove on to Brisbane. After a week we drove non-stop back to Perth, apart from dropping off Marveena in Sydney.

My honours research was in Cyril Edwards' critical phenomena lab, together with Jon Silic. Terry Edwards, Frank van Kann and Kim Jewell were there as PhD students. MJB [Professor Michael Buckingham] was the relevant theoretician. Some members of this 1970 Honours Year class are shown in the accompanying photograph

(supplied by Peter Rye). They are, left to right in the front, centre and back rows of desks respectively: Pam Gunn, Peter Price, George Kirczenow, Jon Silic, Peter Rye, Barry Cross, Graham Yates, Greg Metaxas and Larry Tilbury (with Charles Willock, Lewis Carter, Ray Hobbs and Roger Clifton not attending this particular lecture).



1970 Honours Year Class (See text for names)

During Easter 1973 six of us went on a 4-day bushwalk along the lower Blackwood River, from south of Nannup to Sue's Bridge. These were Jose Varghese (our leader), Rolf Koch, Colin Barnes (a lecturer), Roger Price, Peter Rye and myself (as seen from left to right in the photograph below but with Peter Rye taking the photo). This was my first bushwalk, and it started what was to be my main recreation in adult life. I thank Jose for introducing me to this. While very pleasant, it was not without a few stressed times, such as the lunch 'revolution', with half of us on one side of the river in the sun, and the others on the other side with wet wood. I stuck with Jose, who had the machete.



Bushwalking beside the Blackwood River (See text for names)

Physics technician Norm Poulter was a keen caver, and had won prizes for caving photography. Around 1973 a number of us went on caving trips with Norm. I only went on one, to the 'Easter Extension of Christmas Cave' (?) near Margaret River. The two physics secretaries also went on that trip. A couple of things remain strong in my memory apart from the beauty of the limestone formations in the extension. The first was whilst we were crawling under what I thought was solid limestone, Norm reached up and stuck his thumb into what then looked like packed sand, and said "This is soft coastal sandstone, so be careful". The second was the long squeeze into the extension. We had to crawl in and rotate on our sides half way through, in order to make it through. It was about 2.4m long I think, and well underground. I decided to go after one of the physics secretaries, who I reckoned had greater diameter than me. Some of the other PhD students later went caving with Norm in a very large (7 km) cave on the Nullarbor. (Photo probably taken by Norm Poulter,)



Caving in the 'Easter Extension of Christmas Cave'

In September 1973 Jose Varghese, Ivan Botica from Chemistry and I went on a 3-day walking trip in the Stirling Ranges. We went in from the back side, starting at the NE end. Apart from being hard walking and spectacular, it was a bit exciting at the end of the second day when Ivan slipped and fell while we were climbing down a crack on the side of a canyon, trying to find a way down. We then spent a very uncomfortable night at the bottom of this (dry) creek in the canyon. Next morning, fortunately, we found a reasonable way out and down the mountain, although not without one false attempt ending up on top of a cliff.

In October 1973 Jose Varghese, Rolf Koch and I went on a 'stromatolite finding' trip to Shark Bay. I had read about the recent discovery of stromatolites there, so we decided to have a look. We drove north in my Datsun 1600 and at around 2am, after travelling about 1000km including 200km of dirt track, we arrived where the stromatolites were meant to be, drove onto the beach and found a campsite. Next morning we walked around some flat grey rocks on the edge of the beach looking for the stromatolites without seeing any. Then we realized they were probably what we were walking on - these ones just weren't as nicely spherical as those in the news pictures. The next night we camped some kilometres further towards Denham at a beach on the right of the very narrow isthmus. This was a pure seashell beach – just

densely packed sea shells 100m inland, extending down about 2m (given by a mining exploration trench). What would normally have been a metre high sand rise at the water's edge was loose 1cm diameter sea shells, which was quite mind-blowing. These were then not the widely advertised tourist attractions that they are today! A bit later we drove to Monkey Mia, but this was before their dolphins became well known, and we didn't see any.

For a number of years (forever?) Ted Maslen went running at 5pm every afternoon, and a number of others accompanied him at various times over the years. During 1972 - 76 I was occasionally part of Ted's running group. I tended to run for 2 or 3 weeks, then stop for a number of months. Around August 1972 I took a picture of the then group as we were about to start in King's Park by the overhanging tree on the road behind the colleges (see photograph below). That day the group consisted of, (left to right) Don Philp (a seriously fast runner from Chemistry (in black shorts)), Terry Edwards (brown sweater), Frank van Kann (yellow shorts), John Carras, Bob Stuart (visiting Ted from Carnegie-Mellon), Ted Maslen, Cyril Edwards, Jose Varghese, Roger Price, Peter Rye and myself (taking the photo). We ran what I now call 'Ted's Track', 5.3 km through various sand, concrete and grass tracks (and some road) in King's Park. In recent years I (with assistance from Roger Price) have



Ted's Runners in King's Park (See text for names)

rediscovered this track and have run it a few times. Somehow it is now much longer and steeper than it was then, and the 'short, sharp sand hill' at the 3/4 mark is totally beyond me. I thought I hadn't got that much slower, but my recent best time (28.5 mins) is beyond the slowest times of the group of the 70's. I think my best time around 1975 was a bit over 20 mins, as was Jose's. Roger was running 19 mins something, Ted 18 and Don 17 something, by my recollection. With a month's warning, I think I'd be happy taking on any one of this group today, with the exception of Don if he's still in good shape! Actually, on a return visit to WA around Christmas, probably in late 1994, I went for an after-work run with Ted from the Department. It was just the two of us. Ted had recently had a knee reconstruction, as I recall, and suggested we run along the grass around the front of the river towards Nedlands. We ran about 8km, and for the first half I thought I had his measure at last. The truth became apparent on the run back.

Around 1973 I started participating in an informal ‘Wednesday night seminar’ group of fellow PhD colleagues. The others had been going for some time before I joined. The group included Jose Varghese, Roger Price, John Carras, Peter Rye, Colin Barnes, Ted Zeffert (one of the teaching technicians), Suszanne Thwaites, Greg Metaxas and Rolf Koch I think. As I recall, we met at 6pm for a seminar given by one of us with a few beers in the 4th floor meeting room (?). The topic was chosen by the presenter, but may have been something like ‘early human prehistory’ or some such. After the seminar and discussion had finished, we adjourned to a very cheap restaurant in Northbridge or similar (‘The Balkan’ comes to mind), with a half-gallon glass flagon of ‘hock’ and /or ‘burgundy’. Somewhat later, after more animated discussions, we were likely to attend a cheesecake shop in Subiaco for cheesecake and Dubonnet and/or Galway Pipe. And then we might retire to sit on the floor of Jose’s bed-sit drinking and arguing/discussing into the wee hours. These seminars and ensuing discussions were enormously good fun, and constitute very fond memories for me.

Epilogue

If you are a past graduate of this Department and if reading the above has triggered some memories of your own experiences, I would be delighted to hear about them. They might be suitable for inclusion in this section of the History, which is titled ‘Reminiscences of Life and Events in the Department’. I can be easily contacted by e-mail.

John Robins, PhD 1962
robins@physics.uwa.edu.au