

Tony Coady (ed.), *Why Universities Matter*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, xvii + 254

reviewed by Professor Don Aitkin, Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra

This book started its published life with the great advantage that it was already well-known — Melbourne University Press having already decided not to publish it, allegedly on the ground that it contained matter critical of the management of the University of Melbourne. My guess is that most readers will wonder what the fuss was about.

Others will have a sneaking suspicion that MUP got it right, whatever the motive, for the book is an odd jumble, and most of its contributors deserved something better. You certainly don't learn much from it about why universities matter.

Tony Coady, the philosopher who is the book's editor, says in his Preface that the 'contributions are perhaps viewed as new and significant developments in a conversation about the direction of higher education'. I read on, hoping for the new, and prepared not to argue about what might be significant. By and large, however, the positions put forward by the contributors are familiar ones. That is not to say they are unimportant. Jane Marceau, Stuart Macintyre and Simon Marginson (in a jointly authored chapter), Marginson alone, Peter Karmel, Raymond Gaita, Seamus Miller and Janet McCalman all have sensible things to say about issues in higher education. But so often what they say points in different directions, and does not support the position of the editor — who seems, in particular, not to have taken the slightest notice of what Macintyre and Marginson wrote about the development of the Australian university.

No matter: Coady is sure about where he stands. There has been a 'subordination of universities to political control to an alarming degree'. The *diabolus ex machina*, if not John Dawkins (who comes in for heavy battering by many contributors), or 'Canberra overlords' (whoever they are), is the modern vice-chancellor — craven, power-seeking, authoritarian, a traitor to the academy. Vice-chancellors, or somebody, are given to or responsible for 'strutting, boasting, inflating, aggrandising and expanding'. Melbourne's Alan Gilbert is a frequent target, though not usually by name. Monash's David Robinson is named and given the stick by one contributor, in part for what seemed to me a relatively straightforward remark about the likely future for university management. A tendency to disparage university administrators is common. One contributor refers to them, cuttingly, as 'men and women in suits' who have forgotten what teaching and research are about. Coady talks about 'the lofty complacencies of "leadership"'. Another talks of 'treason' and says that the vice-chancellors, both individually and as a body, were responsible for the betrayal of the universities.

Heavy stuff. Yet it is hard to be sure exactly what bone is being picked. At the risk of censure for want either of intelligence or of proper seriousness I would summarise the Coady position like this. There is a central point to universities, which is disinterested enquiry and respect for truth, virtues which give our

society something of its character. That central point has been lost sight of in the last ten years, partly through Dawkins's abolition of the binary division and the amalgamations which followed, and partly by the more recent reductions in public funding. 'The failure of university administrators to defend the civic university from assault by Commonwealth and State Ministers is conspicuous', say Macintyre and Marginson. No-one actually shows why the abolition of the binary divide must have imperilled the central point. To say 'Dawkins' is apparently a kind of lay-down misere, saving the user from having to use argument or evidence. Judith Brett refers to 'the hordes of post-Dawkins jumped-up technical colleges and Colleges of Advanced Education', though to be fair it is not entirely clear whether this is her own view or one she imagines Alan Gilbert holds. Tony Klein is another categoriser, not only reckoning on 'Dawkins' universities but also 'better' and even 'proper' universities.

It is characteristic of this book that the reader never learns why such categories are necessary, which universities are which, how Coady's lament for what has happened is connected to the structures of the higher education system, that the University of Melbourne in its enlarged form is indeed a Dawkins university and that only 5 of the present 38 universities were untouched organisationally by the post-1988 changes. Only three of the thirteen contributors seem to have spent any time in universities other than Melbourne or another of the old and bold group, and none of the three says anything about what happens there. A better working title for the book might have been 'Why the University of Melbourne Matters', but of course some of the contributors complain that they are tired of hearing its Vice-Chancellor telling everybody exactly that.

Tony Coady has fashioned the term 'myopics' to describe those 'economic rationalists' ('market fundamentalists' would be a more accurate term) who see universities and hospitals solely as productive organisations cranking out 'products' of some kind. Rational economics is, of course, a creation of the university world, but I share some of Coady's distaste for those who cannot, or will not, see that it is society itself which decides what markets are and how they are to work, whether or not slaves are to be bought, or children, or rare birds, or forged artworks, or adulterated food. But there is a good deal of myopia in his own account of the contemporary university world. At the heart of his cry of protest is the claim that universities and academics, especially in the University of Melbourne, are somehow different. They used to have higher status, and were treated better, especially by vice-chancellors.

Every now and then, I want to utter the first part of that cry myself. Yet I doubt that Coady and his contributors would, without raising an eyebrow or two, allow generals to talk like this of the army, nurses of hospitals, teachers of schools, public servants of the public service, farmers of farming, or any manager of his part of Australian industry. The truth surely is that we all make a contribution to the common good, we all do something that no-one else does, we all have a culture, and we all have a patch we like to protect. We have all been affected by the relative decline in Australia's wealth. Universities remained relatively untouched longer than most (but not as long as the judiciary or parliament) because we maintained an element of mystery. But when 700,000

students are in our classrooms and the population is increasingly university-educated, it is hard to maintain the mystery or the privilege; too many people know what university is really like.

And with the greatest of respect to Coady's institution, I don't think it is special in any way other than that it is surrounded by and devoted to medical research and is the principal training ground for the Melbourne establishment. I have been a regular visitor to the University of Melbourne since the early 1960s. I have sat on its selection committees, examined its doctoral theses, been offered posts at various levels, even been asked to show an interest in its vice-chancellorship. I have interviewed dozens of its staff who wanted money for research. It is without doubt a good Australian university, but so are many others. Most important, what Coady thinks is the core of the university is alive and well in them all, wherever there are university teachers who care about their students, about what it is that they do, about the fundamental questions affecting them, about truth, and evidence, and life itself. Get out of Parkville, Tony, and its unfounded assumptions of superiority, and take a look at some other universities. You don't have to go far: as Judith Brett suggests in the book, there are good things going on at La Trobe.

Finally, something should be said in defence of vice-chancellors, who are maligned from start to finish in this book. Only three are mentioned by name, but all are covered by the broad tarry brush that is wielded. I began to wonder how many vice-chancellors Coady has actually known. There is in this book no analysis at all of what vice-chancellors do, no recognition that in virtually all cases they are former academics and in a number of cases most distinguished academics, no understanding of how universities actually work as organisations, no feeling for the real problems of finding enough money to pay all the staff, let alone to pay them properly, no perception of the politics of universities, no mention of university Councils or Senates or of university Acts. Vice-chancellors have to know all of this, and cope with it, and somehow move their institution forward, because if it moves backwards people will lose their jobs. You don't have to love vice-chancellors, but you do need to recognise that they have intractably difficult jobs. At rough count I have known 50 vice-chancellors; I have not encountered a single one who was not devoted to his or her university, and I have known a few who were simply inspirational.

I keep waiting for a book which will explain to Australians why it is that their universities are important, how it is that contemporary Australia is in many respects a creation of the work of universities (Janet McCalman provided a tantalising couple of paragraphs on this subject), and what needs to be done to forge a continuing working relationship between the society and its universities. This book isn't it. It is a collection of diverse essays, assembled to make a point that has not properly been thought through, and is not sustainable anyway.