**Australian economists at Cambridge during the 1930s**

by

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**Abstract**

This article deals with the experiences of the seven young Australian economists who studied at Cambridge University during the 1930s. Their views, recollections and experiences of Cambridge are gathered predominantly through their correspondence with Sir Douglas Copland, a New Zealand-born economist who spent his professional career in Australia. While Keynes’s contact and influence with the antipodean economists has been captured by Donald Markwell (2000) and Alex Millmow (2010) and others, this study look at the formative experience Cambridge had on young, aspiring economists like Alexander Gordon Mackay, Sydney Butlin, Ronald Walker, J.M. ‘Pete’ Garland, Keith Isles, Jean Polglaze and Richard Downing. Some of them attended Maynard Keynes’s Political Economy Club. Several of them attended Cambridge by dint of being awarded Rockefeller Fellowships, while others undertook study there largely at their own expense. As the Australasian representative for the Rockefeller Foundation, Copland was the first point of contact for those Australian economists wishing to study anywhere overseas, not least, Cambridge. The article reveals some of these young scholars’ experience at Cambridge which was at that time considered the finest economics department in the world.

**1. Introduction**

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1 The Business School, University of Ballarat, Mt Helen, Victoria, 3353. I am extremely indebted to Selwyn Cornish, Geoff Harcourt, Marjorie Harper, Susan Howson and Sean Turnell for earlier comments on this paper.
The Douglas Copland papers are probably the most comprehensive of any 20th century Australian economist. They cover the start of his professional career in 1917 as a lecturer in Tasmania, through to his death in 1971. The only drawback is that the papers are held in two different collections, in two different cities, meaning correspondence is scattered between both. That resource underpins this study.

Towards the end of his life Copland decided to get his literary papers into order. Since he always had secretarial assistance from his first appointment at an Australian university his professional correspondence is mostly intact. Copland made especial note of an assignment in the early part of his career when he had been selected to be the representative of a generous American travelling scholarship scheme.

With his D.Sc. from Canterbury College, boundless self-belief and energy, Copland established the first school of commerce in the southern hemisphere at the University of Tasmania. Copland’s subsequent appointment, as the Foundation Dean and Professor of Commerce at the new School of Commerce at the University of Melbourne, caught the attention of officials of the Rockefeller Foundation who in 1925 asked him to become the Australasian representative for the Laura Spelman Memorial Fund, an autonomous organisation within the Rockefeller Foundation of New York. The Foundation awarded Fellowships in the Social Sciences to scholars with research projects. It was an office Copland was to hold for a decade, during which more than two dozen Australasian economists, young and old, were awarded a fellowship to undertake research overseas.

Several chose to study at Cambridge and this is an aspect which this article focuses upon in Part two. It looks at the Rockefeller Fellowship scheme under Copland and how he was instrumental in getting three of his best students on a Fellowship that allowed them to pursue higher studies at Cambridge. Part three catalogues those Australian economists who were awarded a fellowship which allowed them to undertake research at Cambridge. Some Australian students undertook studies at Cambridge by their own efforts or financed by scholarships. Part four records how they fared. Some of the Australian scholars at Cambridge were invited to attend Keynes’s Political Economy Club and Part five discusses some of their experiences there.

2. Copland as Rockefeller Representative
In 1925 Copland was invited by the Laura Spelman Memorial Fund of the Rockefeller Foundation to investigate the teaching of social science in American and European universities and, more importantly, to recommend Australian and New Zealand students for Rockefeller Fellowships. As a preliminary to that task, Copland undertook the visit to familiarise himself with the Foundation’s centres, its scholars and its representatives in cities like Paris, London and New York (B. Ruml to Copland 14/1/1926, Faculty of Economics and Commerce Papers, FECC, University of Melbourne, UMA). The trip allowed Copland to visit most of the leading economic faculties in America, Britain and Canada, thereby allowing him to write a report on the need for more economics and commercial education in Australia which was later published as *Studies in Economics and Political Science*. In his trip he met scholars like Richard T. Ely of Wisconsin, Frank Taussig at Harvard and John Maynard Keynes at Cambridge. Copland kept a diary of his trip and encounters with leading economists building up an enviable network of contacts.

The conditions for a Rockefeller Fellowship were that an applicant had to have a very definite research project to pursue with some progress already made and a year’s work overseas necessary for the purpose of completing it. Moreover it should be a piece of research capable of developing into some really important branch of pure economic theory. Fellows were expected to have reached the Ph.D. standard granted by American universities. Moreover, they must already have done research work and have proven their fitness to proceed further with their work. As the Rockefeller representative for the Social Sciences which covered not just economics but also political science, sociology, history, psychology and anthropology, Copland was the main contact for those seeking a fellowship. Several established Australasian economists used this facility to go abroad and it was Copland who helped screen candidates and suggest supervisors overseas. Initially the fellowships were for study in the United States but this was soon broadened to include Europe and Britain. The practice was that Fellows were to proceed to one university and study under some selected authority nominated in the application form. Usually Copland’s academic colleagues forwarded names, sometimes themselves, as likely applicants. Before interviewing applicants and sending off their nominations to the Rockefeller Foundation for final approval, Copland had to assure his superiors that the fellows were likely to return to their own country and undertake work for which their training
and research had equipped them. There was one episode, however, when an economist from the University of Adelaide, Alexander Gordon Mackay, found that after undertaking research in London and Cambridge his academic job had been wiped out due to government grant cuts. Another condition was that Fellows and their patrons were not to advertise their success. Rather they were to adopt the line of stating that they were going abroad for a period of study. The Foundation adopted this policy to protect itself from being inundated by applications from those seeking assistance for scholarly projects.

Being isolated from the great centres of learning, the universities of Australia and New Zealand were grateful to the Foundation for the opportunities it offered exceptional students and academics to go abroad for further training. By 1935, however, the Foundation withdrew the Fellowship scheme and instead of normally sending four candidates from Australasia every year there was talk of sending only the rare exception. Edmund Day, Head of the Social Science division of the Foundation, praised Copland’s discrimination and judgement in screening candidates: ‘The men (sic) of your selection have turned out to be one of the best groups we have had, and have been a credit to you and to the stock from which they have been drawn’ (E. Day to Copland 11/6/1935, FECC, UMA). Apparently all of Copland’s nominations for a Fellowship were successful, bar one (Copland to R. E. Priestley 11/6/1935, FECC, UMA). The last batch of Fellows was appointed at the end of 1935. They included Jean Polglaze from Melbourne University and Hermann Black from the University of Sydney who elected to go to Harvard. Despite Copland’s protests and, more importantly, that of the Vice Chancellors of all the Australian universities, the Foundation’s trustees wanted to scale down operations and fund only international relations and business cycle research (T. Kittredge to Copland 7/5/1935, FECC, UMA). A generation of Australian economists undoubtedly benefitted from the scheme, not least, the handful that elected to study at Cambridge.

3. The Australian Rockefeller Fellows at Cambridge 1929-1938

The first Australian Rockefeller Fellow who elected to research in economics at Cambridge appears to have been the unfortunate Mackay. He had jumped at the chance of sponsorship (Mackay to Copland 24/3/1926, FECC, UMA). Copland’s Melbourne colleagues like Gordon Wood and Frank Mauldon received Rockefeller
Fellowships on merit but chose to study at London and Harvard respectively. Wood’s work on Australian business cycles with particular reference to domestic and overseas factors was supervised by Theodore Gregory of the London School of Economics. R.C. Mills of the University of Sydney was another recipient heading off to the LSE in the momentous year of 1930 when Australia was facing the blizzard of economic depression. Let us turn attention, however, to the making of several young Australian economists and how their experience at Cambridge facilitated it.

Alexander Gordon Mackay 1929

For five years Mackay had been solely responsible for economics tuition at the University of Adelaide since Herbert Heaton had gone overseas (Anderson and O’Neil, 2002, 10). A graduate of the University of Sydney with first class honours in economics, Mackay had the honour of being one of the first Rockefeller Fellows Copland nominated. Mackay’s proposed research topic was ‘The financial basis of Anglo-American Relations’ (Mackay to Copland 19/7/1927, Copland Papers, NLA). Copland encouraged Mackay to focus on his earlier work on Anglo-Australian bank mergers. Mackay wanted to spend time in London and Cambridge but Copland told him ‘I think the general influence of Cambridge would be superior to that of the London School of Economics’ (Copland to Mackay 20/2/1928, Copland Papers, NLA). Mackay arrived at Trinity College, Cambridge in January 1929 and reported to J.R.M. Butler who was the Rockefeller representative for Great Britain.

Unfortunately for Mackay, his timing was out of sequence with the tide of events. The fact, for instance, that he was going abroad disqualified him from applying for the chair in economics at the University of Adelaide which was filled by Leslie Melville. Mackay had only his humble assistant lecturer post to return to. As things turned out, even that position evaporated as Adelaide had to impose expenditure cuts. Whilst at Trinity, Mackay was informed of his release from duties for 1931 but given a year’s salary in compensation (J.M. Stewart to Mackay 14/11/1930, University of Adelaide Archives). Mackay cabled back to the council how the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as Cambridge University, were both unhappy at the measure, especially since a great effort in training and effort had gone into his research (Mackay to University of Adelaide Council, 30/11/1930, UAA). Copland told Sir William Mitchell, the University of Adelaide Vice Chancellor, that Mackay’s experience in London and
Cambridge would have made him more useful that he had been before (Copland to Mitchell 8/12/1930, UAA). It left Mackay jobless in England. He would eventually resurface with an academic post in Rangoon, Burma. It is not known whether he ever returned to Australia. Mackay (1931) did, however, publish work that might have been partly completed in Cambridge.

E. Ronald Walker 1930

One of Mills’ students, E. Ronald Walker, whom he regarded as on one of the ablest students he had ever taught, was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1930. It helped that Copland had been his examiner for his MA thesis on ‘Unemployment in Australia’. Copland wrote to his overseer, John Van Sickle, hailing Walker noting that his thesis ‘showed a clear grasp of the literature, a capacity to make sound judgements and a familiarity with statistical technique’ (Copland to J. Van Sickle 26/5/1930, FECC, UMA). Walker wanted to undertake a comparative study of unemployment in various industries in different countries. Copland suggested he narrow his study down to just Australia. Initially Walker wanted to study at the LSE under Gregory but Copland recommended Cambridge and Maurice Dobb as his supervisor (Copland to E.R. Walker 10/4/1930, FECC, UMA). It was A.C. Pigou, however, who became his research supervisor with Dennis Robertson assisting. Immersed in his studies and wanting to complete his doctorate, Walker sought an extension of his Fellowship while resident at St John’s College. Copland reported to Van Sickle: ‘I have just had a letter from Professor Pigou in which he writes that he is entirely satisfied with the work E.R. Walker is on and that his Fellowship might be continued to great advantage’ (Copland to Van Sickle 5/12/1931, FECC, UMA). Walker undertook one of the first doctorates in economics from Cambridge though the Rockefeller Fellowships were not expressly designed for recipients to undertake doctorates (Cairncross, 1998, 43-44).² The outcome was a book entitled Australia in the Great Depression. When Copland visited Cambridge in late 1933 he reported that he had heard ‘excellent reports’ of Walker from faculty staff (‘Occasional Notes – visit to Cambridge’, 26/5/1933, FECC, UMA).

² Alec Cairncross (1998) a postgraduate student at Cambridge being supervised by Colin Clark recalled that Ronald Walker was the first Cambridge student to take the PhD in economics. However, Cairncross seems to have overlooked that the New Zealand economist, Horace Belshaw, earned a doctorate in agricultural economics from Cambridge in 1926.
Maurice Belz 1932

Both Copland and Giblin wanted to equip economic analysis with quantification and meaningful statistics some time before the Keynesian revolution gave an impetus to that endeavour (Prest, 1978, 406). Two of the Rockefeller Fellows from Melbourne, who went to Cambridge, had that specific purpose in mind. Copland encouraged Maurice Belz, a senior lecturer in the Department of Mathematics at Melbourne, to apply for a Rockefeller Fellowship so that he could expose students at Melbourne to advanced statistical techniques. Belz was greatly interested in the mathematical theory of statistics and in the mathematical theory of population. Copland suggested he go to England and study under Udny Yule of Cambridge and Professor Bowley of the LSE (Copland to Van Sickle 2/12/1931, FECC, UMA).

John ‘Pete’ Garland 1934

One of Copland’s best students, J.M. ‘Pete’ Garland, was strongly encouraged to apply for a fellowship. Garland was extremely grateful to Copland for paving the way, joking how he had changed his mind about the oil magnate Rockefeller who had ‘grown to a new stature in my eyes’ (J.M. Garland to Copland 13/4/1934, FECC, UMA). Copland had greatly praised Garland’s diligence and application and blessed the idea of working with Gerard Shove on the problem of production and increasing and decreasing cost in the rural industries (Copland to Kittredge 1/5/1934, FECC, UMA). In his testimonial for Garland, Copland told the Foundation that ‘a year in a stimulating atmosphere like that at Cambridge’ would be a power of good for the young Garland (Copland to Kittridge 1/5/1935, UMA, FECC).

Garland did not regret taking the fellowship though, like Mackay, his Adelaide position was supplanted by the arrival of Edward Shann to take up the chair at Adelaide. In an interview with Tracy Kitteridge, the European representative of the Foundation, Garland felt that for economics graduates interested in theory Cambridge provided better opportunities than London (Interview with Garland, Australian Fellow, June 1935, FECC, UMA). A euphoric Garland told Copland how he had arrived ‘at this heaven of economists’ and having ‘famous names made flesh before one’ (Garland to Copland 18/10/1934, FECC, UMA). He regaled Copland how
everyone he met was kind to him though he suspected it was not ‘their natural disposition’. He attributed it to Copland’s grand words about him for Garland suspected Cambridge could be ‘difficult for a stranger’ (Ibid). Joe Burton, a colleague of Copland’s who had also been awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship to be spent at the University of Paris examining the French economy, visited Garland and reported that he had ‘settled down’ (Burton to Copland 25/5/1935, FECC, UMA).

Some of the Cambridge faculty were aware of the problem new students had adjusting to Cambridge. Austin Robinson told Copland ‘It always worries me when people arrive in Cambridge expecting to find organizations for their reception which do not exist’ (E.A.G. Robinson to Copland 8/9/1935, FECC, UMA). Robinson told Copland that the faculty was trying to improve things for visiting postgraduates so that they ‘may be able to remedy some of the defects which have, I think, been real in the past, and have been felt not only by some of the over-coddled products of American post-graduate departments but also by the more level-headed and responsible people like Walker’ (Ibid). As a partial response Cambridge would develop an economics qualification, the Diploma of Economics, for visiting postgraduate students.

Jean Polglaze 1936

Jean Polglaze had been the first woman to undertake the Master of Commerce at Melbourne with a thesis on the measurement of investment and national income and its relation to business fluctuations. Roland Wilson and Giblin were chosen as her examiners. She had been previously awarded the Kilmany scholarship for Economic Research. Her graduation, along with the news of award of a Rockefeller fellowship, caught the eye of the media.¹ Polglaze wanted to go to Cambridge and study statistical work and business cycles under Colin Clark (Copland to Kittridge 3/7/1935, FECC, UMA). It was arranged that she would stay at Girton College where Marjorie Tappan Hollond, a member of the economics faculty, was based. Hollond had been Joan Robinson’s first supervisor (Harcourt and Kerr, 2009, 2). Copland told Hollond that Polglaze was the ‘most competent woman student I have had during 20 years experience of university teaching and she ranks in the first three of both sexes’

Copland asked another Cambridge academic, J.W.F. Rowe, at Pembroke College to ‘take a fatherly interest’ in Polglaze whom he described as ‘his protégé’ (Copland to J.W. F. Rowe 9/4/1936, FECC, UMA). It was prescient, for five months after she arrived in May 1937, Clark departed for Australia on a year’s sabbatical. Working with Clark had been ‘an especially valuable experience’ (cited in Prest, 1978, 406). Ironically Clark’s departure was largely the product of Copland’s invitation to him to undertake some teaching in Melbourne and elsewhere in Australia. It left Polglaze in a quandary to find a suitable replacement, since, as she complained to Copland, there was no one else interested in her line of work at Cambridge. Her three supervisors, Hollond, Robertson and Piero Sraffa were all concerned about her predicament and agreed that her research project would be a ‘solitary effort’ (Polglaze to Copland 8/6/1937, FECC, UMA). Polglaze asked Copland whether she should just focus on the theoretical side of investment. However, all three of her advisors belonged in the sceptical camp as far as the new investment theory of Keynes was concerned. She explained her predicament: ‘If I stay here till January, I shouldn’t be able to do much more than acquire a certain glibness in the Keynesian language and I’m not certain that is worthwhile’ (Ibid). She concluded by suggesting going off to the National Bureau of Economic Research in New York where Simon Kuznets was pursuing similar work but that this would mean another year of funding from the Foundation.

When Copland received this news he showed it to Clark and they agreed that it was a good idea provided the Foundation gave Polglaze another year. Copland wrote to Robertson broaching the idea of Polglaze going off to New York, adding that he hoped she would return back to Cambridge and ‘imbibe a little more of the Cambridge atmosphere’ (Copland to Robertson 29/6/1937, FECC, UMA). However, she did not return there. Clark also wrote to Robertson informing him how Polglaze had, in her research, still to correlate figures of the production of capital goods within Australia to the general business situation there for the past thirty years. He made no mention of the New York proposal but suggested instead that Robertson might consider taking Polglaze on as his research student: ‘In this work you could direct her in a way that nobody else in the world could…I know you make it a rule not to take research students, but I put it to you in all seriousness that Miss Polglaze is capable of doing work a long way above Cairncross’ (Clark to Robertson 29/6/1937, FECC, UMA). Robertson apparently did not take up the challenge but Polglaze drew upon...
some technical assistance from Professor Marschak of Oxford and Michal Kalecki, who was undertaking a joint Cambridge-Oxford study on cost structure within British industry.

Meanwhile Copland wrote to the Rockefeller foundation backing her case for another year’s funding (Copland to Kittridge 29/6/1937, FECC, UMA). He also wrote to Wesley Mitchell at Columbia seeking endorsement for the plan and saying that the experience at the Bureau would be good for both Polglaze and Melbourne (Copland to Mitchell 29/6/1937, FECC, UMA). It proved the right action as Polglaze found the Bureau to be ‘a mine of information…and the people who did the detailed work on capital formation are always there’ (Polglaze to Copland 23/3/1938, Copland Papers, NLA). She spent ten months in America, six of them at Columbia, three at Chicago where she attended graduate classes and also at Harvard where she spent a few months before returning home via California and the Pacific (Report of activities of a Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation, 1937-38, FECC, UMA).

For Polglaze spending 1937 at Cambridge had overall been ‘at once stimulating and disappointing’ for Polglaze (cited in Prest, 1978, 406). She reflected that much as she admired Keynes, there was too uncritical a view of him in Cambridge (Polglaze to Copland 23/3/1938, Copland Papers, NLA). Polglaze had attended one of Keynes’ lectures entitled ‘Footnotes on the General Theory’ and was most impressed: ‘Keynes himself, like the pyramids, is so exactly what I expected as to be almost disappointing; but his lecture was full of interesting stuff and far more intelligible than the General Theory itself. I should probably believe everything he said even if I had disagreed with his fundamental assumptions’ (Polglaze to Copland 17/2/1937, FECC, UMA).

Polglaze also attended Sraffa’s seminar for research students and noted how they became ‘very heated’, especially if he happens to disagree with Keynes as he frequently does (Ibid). Polglaze also informed Copland about the stranglehold Keynes’ doctrine had on Cambridge: ‘Keynes’s disciples will not allow one sentence of the GT to be misapplied and spring to its defence in English, or German, or Italian or American so that the Tower of Babel is nothing to it’(Ibid). Polglaze would duly return to Melbourne in early 1939 to take up a lectureship in statistical technique.

Another home-bound economist at that time was Keith Isles who was to take up the chair at Adelaide. Isles was one of those rare cases of a Commonwealth student
who undertook the Economics Tripos at Cambridge largely at his own expense supplemented by the odd scholarship. Sydney Butlin was in the same boat. Richard Downing undertook a shortened version of the Tripos only available to Dominion students. The cases of the three are discussed below.

4. Australian students undertaking the Economics Tripos in the 1930s

A platoon of Australian students headed off to Cambridge during the 1930s. This paper discusses three of them.  

Keith Isles

A Tasmanian, Isles had been a student of Copland’s at Hobart where he had undertaken a bachelor of commerce replete with honours. Isles became a school teacher in economics at St Peter’s College, Adelaide. While there, Isles also undertook more studies in economics at Adelaide University and received the Tinlyne Scholarship for research with his project on ‘The Development of Methods of Marketing Australian Products’. Copland had advised him to go to Cambridge. He commenced there in January 1927 as a student of Gonville and Caius College. A string of honours came his way. He just missed out on a first in Part One of the Economics Tripos but achieved a First in the Second Part when normally very few firsts were given out. Before then, and while still an undergraduate at Cambridge, Isles was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship which Copland in Melbourne facilitated with the assistance of J.R. Bellerby, Isles’ supervisor at Caius (J.R. Bellerby to J.R.M. Butler 22/11/1928, Copland Papers, NLA). Isles had initiated matters by writing to Copland to sound him out about his chances of a scholarship beforehand (Isles to Copland 21/8/1928, Copland Papers, NLA). Copland had then contacted Butler with a

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4 The missing man was one Jack Horsfall who was also a student of Giblin and Copland’s. Horsfall was a honours class student winning a scholarship and also an athlete of some repute. A student at Trinity, Horsfall was supervised by Robertson and Clark (Noonan, 2005). He secured second class honours. Since there was, for some strange reason, no correspondence with Copland he could only ascertain his old student’s progress by correspondence with Australian students or Cambridge staff. After teaching Banking at Cambridge, Horsfall worked for a stockbroker in England. He returned to Australia in the post-war years and became the first editor of the Australian Financial Review.

5 ‘Tasmanian success; Mr Keith Isles; Honours at Cambridge’, The Mercury 25/6/1929.
strong recommendation about Isles (Copland to Butler 20/10/1928, Copland Papers, NLA).

Working under the supervision of Bellerby, Isles’ chosen research topic was on the relationship between wages policy and monetary policy. His project was to uncover how far conflicting monetary and wages policies have been responsible for economic disturbances and, secondly, to discuss possible methods of coordinating these policies with a view to improving economic conditions and diminishing social friction.

In 1930 Isles was awarded the Wrenbury Scholarship, intended for research in economics and economic history by a Cambridge student. In 1932 he won the Adam Smith prize for an article on wages policy. In 1933 he took the M.Sc degree for his dissertation on ‘Wages Policy and the Price Level’. It was published the year after (Isles, 1934).

There was talk that Isles would be offered a college fellowship at Cambridge but it never eventuated. Keynes had marked his dissertation and wrote a short testimonial stating that he had ‘a knowledge of his (Isles) capacity based on seeing him very frequently during his time a Cambridge, and having heard him read papers to an Economic society… He is not only well grounded in the science of the subject but is thoroughly conversant with the latest line on advance’ (enclosures in letter, Isles to Copland 11/5/1937, FECC, UMA).

Robertson had earlier told Isles that it was only a matter of time before he secured a professorship (Isles to Copland 11/5/1937, FECC, UMA). He was right. After three years at a lecturer in political economy at Edinburgh University, Isles was offered the chair in economics at Swansea University College. Isles, however, was ‘desperate’ to return to Australia (Isles to Copland 31/7/1937, FECC, UMA). He had unsuccessfully applied for the chair at the University of Tasmania in 1935. Isles was more successful in 1938 when Mitchell asked him to submit an application for the vacant chair in economics at Adelaide. Mitchell asked Copland about Isles’ qualities saying his opinion would be ‘effective’ for the university council (Mitchell to Copland 25/10/1938, FECC, UMA). Copland’s response revealed more about himself than Isles: ‘He went from Cambridge rather full of the importance of theory - not a bad fault. He just missed getting into the inner circle of young dons in Cambridge. That may well have been a blessing in disguise because I thought I detected in him an
exaggerated idea of the importance of theoretical disputation’s’ (Copland to Mitchell 28/10/1938, FECC, UMA).

Copland felt Isles’ election to the chair just reward: ‘The experiment you entered upon years in giving up teaching to go to Cambridge, no doubt under considerable financial strain, was fully justified’. Copland added that Adelaide had been considering appointing the Harvard-trained Arthur Smithies or Walker but ‘your career was a sufficient assurance that you mixed caution and courage in an agreeable fashion’. Isles responded: ‘I feel greatly honoured that I am to become a member of the band of economists who have earned for themselves a reputation throughout the world’ (Isles to Copland 16/12/1938, Copland Papers, NLA).

*Sydney Butlin 1933*

Sydney Butlin graduated from the University of Sydney with a first class honours in an Arts degree along with winning the university medal in economics in 1932. He was aware, however, that his degree did not represent advanced training in the subject and so, unlike Walker who had used his Rockefeller Fellowship to undertake a PhD, Butlin decided to use three scholarships that he merited to take a second first degree in economics. It was certainly a poetic time to reread economics. At the time Cambridge was the centre of the economic universe in terms of theoretical economics. In 1932 Keynes had changing the title of his lectures to ‘A monetary theory of production’. Butlin (1946, 9) attended Keynes’s lectures at Mill Lane during 1933 and 1934 when the central themes of *The General Theory* were being laid out but it seems he did not get caught up in the rapture. His main supervisor, Robertson, along with Butlin’s prior education ensured that he did not fall into idolizing Keynes. The relationship with Robertson coloured Butlin’s opinion of Cambridge exceptionalism and Keynes and his circle (Butlin, 1978, 103). Rather Butlin fell under the sway of Robertson’s mental processes and style of scholarship (Butlin, 1978, 104). While he was also much moved by Joan Robinson and her work on imperfect competition, Butlin was less impressed with her involvement in the Cambridge circus. When he returned home, Butlin was hired as an assistant lecturer at his old university and would later teach students Keynes’s *General Theory* and as early as 1936 (Groenewegen, 2009, 27).
Given his detachment towards Cambridge and Keynes, it was somewhat ironical that when the latter died in 1946 the Victorian Branch of the Economic Society of Australia and New Zealand wanted to commission a memorial lecture (Minutes of the Victorian Branch, 26/4/1946, Economic Society of Australia, UMA). Initially, the branch asked Giblin to write a memorial piece but he was indisposed. Wood then approached Butlin who came to Melbourne on 28 June to give a lecture on the ‘Life and Work of J.M. Keynes’ which was later published (Butlin, 1946).

Richard Downing 1938

Another student of Copland and Giblin’s, Downing had excelled at economics gaining first class honours. Downing had also worked for Giblin which had given him a good insight into the methods and problems of economic research. It is likely that Copland suggested Downing go to Cambridge. Like Isles and Butlin, Downing would rely upon an array of scholarships and his own resources to fund his Cambridge education (Brown, 2001, 58). In a letter to the Provost at King’s College, Cambridge, Copland considered that Downing could either do the Tripos or proceed into research which was his ultimate aim (Copland to the Provost, King’s College, 29/12/1937, FECC, UMA). Giblin was his other referee and having seen him at close quarters wrote that he was ‘strongly impressed by his general competence, his persistence and thoroughness and practical efficiency in investigating work and his general sanity of judgement’ (L.F. Giblin to Board of Research Studies, Cambridge 16/8/1937, Downing Papers).

Downing undertook three subjects in Part II of the Economic Tripos as part of requirement for completing the newly-established Diploma of Economics. The diploma was designed to meet the needs of Dominion students who desired to combine theoretical studies with research work which involved a dissertation of 10,000 words (Downing to Copland 7/7/1938, Copland Papers, NLA). Downing’s registration was later changed to that of a research student and a candidate for the Ph.D. and that this was backdated to October 1937 (J.T. Saunders, Secy Board of Research Studies to Downing 9/6/1939, Downing Papers). Downing, however, would never start his doctorate possibly because of the interdiction of the war. Apparently Downing never recorded much of his five terms at Cambridge or spoke much of it afterwards (Brown, 2001, 58-9). His biographer, Nicholas Brown, was reduced, in
part, to drawing upon Downing’s lectures notes and forensically inferring what he felt about being there. However there were two letters, addressed to Copland, where Downing made considerable observations about life at Cambridge.

Downing undertook three units in the Tripos: Money, Public Finance and Principles. He considered himself ‘very lucky’ to have Richard Kahn and Gerald Shove as his supervisors. The latter considered him one of the best research students he had ever had (Testimonial by Shove, 20/6/1938, Copland Papers, NLA). In turn, Copland considered Shove one of the best teachers of economics in the world (Copland to Downing, January 1938, Copland Papers, NLA). Like Garland, Downing conveyed how interesting it was to meet ‘some of the mythical figures which one has studied in awe for so long…Prof. Pigou is the only one who manages to keep up the myth, I think. He looks quite magnificent as he strides in full dignity and always a few minutes late to his place at the High Table’ (Downing to Copland 12/1/1938, Copland Papers, NLA). While Keynes was ill and not residing at Cambridge ‘he and his wife seems to be part of the presiding genii whose spirits loom over King’s and occupy men’s minds very much’ (Ibid). Downing was being instructed on the *General Theory* by Kahn and had almost ‘completely embraced the faith’ though the fact that he also used Hawtrey to get ‘a clear statement on Keynes’ meant that he was regarded with some suspicion by some. Kalecki, too, was a considerable influence upon Downing. That aside, Downing complained about the staff at Cambridge: ‘The trouble is that most of the people here with new ideas refuse to write about them and commit themselves in any way and its often difficult to get their points from lectures’ (Ibid). Downing also found absorbing Joan Robinson’s work on imperfect competition a struggle and preferred the alternative account by Edward Chamberlain. His admiration for Shove as a supervisor and lecturer might have coloured his views of Robinson since the former had considerable animus towards her and regarded her ‘as an overdevelopment of Note 4 of Marshall’s mathematical appendix’ (Ibid).

In January 1938 Downing met up with Polglaze, the only other Australian student there, and just before she headed off to America. He noted how she had ‘steadfastly refused to yield to the mania for Keynes here’ (Ibid). When news of Downing getting a first was announced Copland marked it as a ‘giant triumph for you and us, and Melbourne in general’ (Copland to Downing 23/6/1938, Copland Papers, NLA). Downing had still to complete a sub-thesis with Brian Reddaway whom he had befriended in Melbourne as his supervisor (Brown, 2001, 71 pasim).
5. Australians at Keynes’ Political Economy Club

Keynes had established his club in 1909 to keep in touch with a small and select group of undergraduate and research students (Skidelsky, 2005, 129-130)(Cornish, 1990, 60)(Plumptre, 1975, 221). It met every Monday evening during term. Wynne Plumptre cited Austin Robinson that participation in the Club was ‘fascinating and alarming’ and that ‘through his Club Keynes knew intimately all the best of each generation of Cambridge economists, and exercised a more personal influence on them than anyone else’ (Plumptre, 1975, 251). To attract an invitation to the Club was, therefore, greatly prized.

What exactly went on at the club has been detailed by H. M. Robertson who attended Cambridge in the 1920s. Robertson found meetings of the Club ‘delightful – and frightening’. After the speaker of the evening had read his paper discussion ensued. ‘The secretary presented slips from which everyone made a choice. Some of these bore numbers; others were blanks. If you drew a number, you had to get up to make a contribution to the discussion, but only on the order of the number on the slips…If you drew a blank, you could not speak at all, no matter how sure you were that you had something original to contribute to the debate’. Robertson felt ‘one learnt a good deal in addition to economics in Keynes Club’. The best was yet to come: ‘At the end Keynes, who had been sprawling in an easy chair, got up and stood in front of the fireplace, leant back and rested his shoulders on the mantelpiece, and entranced us with an eloquent and searching yet essentially kindly summing up, unwounding though unmistakable in its criticisms’(Robertson, 1983, 411). Lorie Tarshis (1978, 50-1) gives a similar account.

The first Australasian economist to receive such an honour was Belshaw, who was undertaking doctoral work on rural industries. Belshaw got a personal invitation to join the Club from Keynes himself (Belshaw to Copland 7/3/1925, FECC, UMA). Walker went one better, not only receiving an invite from Kahn to join Keynes’ Club but also was asked to join some of the private seminars which later crystallized into the Cambridge Circus (Cornish, 1990, 60).
Isles read papers before the Political Economy Club. One of those papers was on disharmonious monetary and wages policies (Isles to Copland 2/10/1930, FECC, UMA). Isles told Copland that his paper was in favour of the permanent abandonment of gold standard in favour of internal price stabilisation. He added that ‘most of us here now have turned short-period protectionists. Keynes goes still further and that the long period arguments against protection that we’ve found so convincing in the past have probably little or no validity in modern conditions, at any rate in this country’ (Isles to Copland 3/3/1931, FECC, UMA).

Isles was at Cambridge when Australia was going through the worst of the depression including the risk of defaulting on its London loans. His attendance at the Club prompted Keynes to refer to the dire state of the Australian economic situation: ‘Keynes told me on the evening of my paper that he cabled you for an article on the Australian situation. He thought the Niemeyer-Gregory proposals, by being impossible to carry out had forced matters into the hands of the extremists, and said he received cables from intelligent Australians asking him to oppose the proposals, but that he didn’t know what was happening he, of course, could do nothing’ (Isles to Copland 13/1/1931, FECC, UMA).

It is not known how many meetings of Keynes’s Club Isles attended but in his last year there he received an inquiry from Wood, back in Melbourne: ‘We are preparing to establish a political economy club on the lines of the Keynes club at Cambridge. I should be very glad…you could let me know how the thing was managed, how the men were selected, what influence upon selection was exerted by members of the teaching staff’ (Wood to Isles 5/4/1933, FECC, UMA). Melbourne would later establish its own discussion club called The Shillings. Butlin, too, attended the Club but Schedvin (1978, 143) suggests that he was put off by Keynes demolishing a student not on his guard. This account does not square with that of H.M. Robertson, Tarshis (1978) nor Harry Johnson’s (1978, 131-3) recollections.

It was Garland, though, of all the Australian students that endured an astonishing baptism of fire at the Club. On the first day of his arrival at Cambridge he was invited to attend the Club where Keynes himself was giving a paper. Garland went along to hear Keynes ‘distilling the metaphysical essence of his latest theories of

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6 The reference to the Niemeyer-Gregory proposals relate to how these two leading members of the Bank of England team visiting Australia to appreciate the economic state it was in recommended balanced budgets for all Australian governments and not departing from parity with sterling.
money’ (Garland to Copland 18/10/1934, FECC, UMA). Garland was not just ‘overwhelmed’ he had the ‘bad luck’, as he put it, to draw one of the ‘winning numbers’: ‘I’m afraid I made rather an unprofitable journey to the fireplace’ (Ibid). Copland commiserated ‘It must have been a trying experience to see Keynes in action at your first meeting of the Political Economy Club and to be called on to speak afterwards (Copland to Garland 19/11/1934, FECC, UMA).

Conclusion

The Rockefeller Foundation and Copland’s effective stewardship of it in the antipodes was a positive force in the professionalization of the Australian economics profession during the interwar period. This paper focused on the four Australian economists who attended Cambridge in the 1930s financed by their Rockefeller Fellowships along with three others who undertook the Economics Tripos financed by scholarships and private means. One of the latter, Isles, had the benefit of a Rockefeller Fellowship issued by the British representative of the Foundation. Overall Copland was instrumental in encouraging six of the seven to attend Cambridge. In a sense he gave vent to Marshall’s famous aim for the Tripos ‘to increase the number of those, whom Cambridge sends out into the world with cool heads and warm hearts’. Six of the seven returned home and made a contribution to Australian economics. Four became professor (Walker, Butlin, Isles and Downing) two associate professor (Belz and Polglaze) while another, Garland, rose to become a senior executive with the country’s central bank. Later Isles would become Vice Chancellor at the University of Tasmania and Walker a distinguished diplomat. While some, Butlin and Polglaze, came away from the place a little disillusioned, overall a Cambridge economics education served the Australian contingent well.

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