

HUGH STRETTON AC

1924–2015

FELLOW · ELECTED 1969



HUGH STRETTON BY ROBERT HANNAFORD, 1995.
REPRODUCED COURTESY OF R. HANNAFORD.

Very few historians have possessed the ability and inclination to leave a mark on so many spheres of human activity as Hugh Stretton. Stretton influenced governments, professions and public discourse in Australia and further afield as an economic, environmental, social and political theorist. Yet all his writings show a concern for historical context, and an insistence on the complexity of the forces at work in social life, reflecting his conviction that ‘The more we know about the range of human experience so far, the better we may be able to judge what’s worth trying for next’.

Stretton’s parents met at the University of Melbourne, where both were active in student life. He was the younger son of Leonard Stretton, a Victorian county court judge of wide civic and literary interests and his wife, Norah Crawford BA. Growing up in a happy and stimulating middle-class suburban family, Stretton attended Beaumaris State School, then Mentone Grammar and Scotch College. Although he enlisted and served three years as a naval rating after only the first year of combined undergraduate Arts-Law studies, his outstanding

academic abilities were apparent well before he became Rhodes Scholar for Victoria in 1946. R. G. Menzies, a family friend and one of his referees, then characterised Stretton as a man of ‘of rare intelligence, with marked capacity for acquiring knowledge in an orderly way’, besides ‘an interesting combination of solidity and humour’, and ‘a considerable capacity for silence’. To R. M. Crawford and his Melbourne history department colleagues, Stretton was ‘perhaps the outstanding student of our experience’. Having impressed his Oxford teachers no less than their Melbourne counterparts, Stretton was elected to a tutorial fellowship at Balliol College even before his final examinations for the BA in Modern History. Prior to taking up that post, Stretton spent a year at Princeton, where he encountered the purportedly objective social-scientific theorising which eventually provided the main theme and target of his first book, and a continued preoccupation thereafter.

Still under the age of thirty and reputedly one of Oxford’s best history teachers, highly regarded by both peers and pupils, Stretton was recruited in 1953 to the University of Adelaide’s vacant history chair. For over a decade after his arrival on campus fifteen months later, Professor Stretton concentrated on teaching and building up the department, until he famously resigned both title and salary for a readership in 1968. He lectured without notes, in the early days necessarily across much of the syllabus, on occasion covering three courses at once; former students still speak of his teaching with awe and affection. But the advent of federal funding for universities and determined committee work by its new professor enabled the department’s lecturing staff to double from six to twelve at the end of the 1950s, then to double again by 1966, when Stretton handed over the headship to his star recruit, George Rudé FAHA. In an era of unprecedented tertiary expansion and a sellers’ market for academics, the liveliness and egalitarian ethos of Stretton’s department attracted a enriching diversity of historians to a university always more dependent on imported than native talent. Anything but a god-professor, if by no means lacking in natural authority, newcomers found Stretton an unusually hospitable and welcoming colleague, as ready with hands-on assistance in home renovation as helpful comment on their manuscripts.

Administration and teaching did not advance his own writing, nor did the marital breakdown which left him bringing up two sons, then another daughter and son born into the happy domestic environment created by his second marriage to Patricia Gibson. But in 1966 Stretton relinquished administrative responsibilities and took his family on what proved for him an immensely fruitful study leave to Canberra. There as visiting fellow in the history department of the Australian National University's Research School of Social Sciences he drafted *The Political Sciences: General Principles of Selection in Social Science and History*. This book attracted considerable domestic and international attention when published in 1969, as much for its learned iconoclasm and razor-sharp prose as a remorseless attack on the epistemological claims and ethical consequences of supposedly objective, value-free social science. The other product of his Canberra sojourn was an abiding interest in the principles and practice of urban planning, which saw its first substantial published expression in the now classic text, *Ideas for Australian Cities* (1970; 3rd edition, 2001).

The Political Sciences appeared as an academic monograph under Routledge's imprint. After accumulating rejection slips from six publishers, *Ideas for Australian Cities* was a self-published 'Orphan Book', proudly proclaiming its status as 'amateur', the opinions 'my own – those of a user of the cities, not an expert'. Like most of Stretton's subsequent writings, *Ideas for Australian Cities* eschewed scholarly apparatus and spoke directly to the general reader. But like its predecessor it was also very much an historian's book. *The Political Sciences* used various historians' causal explanations of specific historical events and processes to analyse the role of values in determining both the questions asked and the answers given by scholars of different persuasions. *Ideas* analysed the contemporary state of major Australian cities through insightful sketches of their distinctive individual histories, showing both how they came to be as they were and where they might go next. Like the rest, this most influential of all Stretton's works, 'a political tract, not a planning manual', is marked by overt moral commitment, explicitly siding with 'the poor, unless the rich have exceptionally productive excuses. Also, for women and children against men'. Characteristically contrarian, not least in defending the much-maligned Australian suburb with its free-standing houses and gardens, which 'reconciles access to work and city with private, adaptable, self-expressive living space at home', Stretton further argued for the manifold human and social, individual and communal benefits of smaller regional centres as against massive metropolitan conurbations – Adelaide and Canberra, as against Melbourne and Sydney.

Reissued by Georgian House three months after its debut, Stretton's book struck an immediate chord among politicians and planners, architects, public servants and urban activists. Its author was soon in demand as a consultant to state and commonwealth governments, including the federal Department of Urban and Regional Affairs established by the incoming Whitlam administration. He was also appointed by South Australian Premier Don Dunstan to the board of the South Australian Housing Trust, eventually serving as deputy chair from 1973 until 1989. In 1974 his ABC Boyer Lectures on *Housing and Government* gained a wide national audience for his arguments against conventional economic wisdom, emphasising the productive role of the household and the case for mobilising public resources to facilitate both more and more equal housing provision. 1975 saw a second revised edition of *Ideas for Australian Cities*; the next year brought another major work, *Capitalism, Socialism and the Environment* (Cambridge University Press), followed two years later by *Urban Planning in Rich and Poor Countries* (Oxford University Press). Whereas this latter short book broke new ground by applying Strettonian insights on a comparative basis to urban policies around the world, the former outlined in 332 pages a still more ambitious agenda, addressing global problems of inequality, inflation, resource depletion and environmental degradation with special reference to the western democracies, postulating a series of imagined futures together with a wide-ranging program for reform of, and from, the Left. As usual, a number of sacred cows perished in the process. Still carrying a full history department teaching load, in addition to his considerable Housing Trust responsibilities, Stretton also continued to produce a stream of shorter articles, chapters, lectures and talks.

Yet if the cultural and political climate of the 1960s and early '70s had been sympathetic to the egalitarian social-democratic goals Stretton championed, a very different scale of values came to the fore in the later 1970s and '80s swing to the Right. Stretton was particularly outraged by what he denounced as the treachery of the Hawke-Keating administration, elected in 1983 on a 'big-spending, socially responsible Labor manifesto', but adopting within twelve months a neo-liberal economic reform program of privatisation and deregulation – 'they were to the right of the Tories'. His response was not confined to the volume of *Political Essays* published by Georgian House in 1987 (provoking a heated reaction from Paul Keating in the *Sydney Morning Herald*), or his co-authored *Public Goods, Public Enterprise, Public Choice: Theoretical Foundations of the Contemporary Attack on Government* (Macmillan, 1994). Rather, it took the form of a very big – 864 page – book. *Economics: A New Introduction* (UNSW Press, 1999) (initially to be entitled *Anti-Samuelson*)

constitutes a general recasting of that discipline in the form of an alternative textbook, with the avowed aim of demonstrating how economic phenomena actually behave in the real world, as distinct from how contemporary theory might seek to explain their workings – a concern for the empirical and pragmatic again reflecting Stretton’s historical training. Although most academic economists predictably chose to ignore Stretton’s remarkable challenge, muted praise came from an unexpected quarter; in a review for a free-market think-tank’s house journal, the *Financial Times* journalist Sir Samuel Brittan commended the book’s ‘many engaging features’, and suggested it be reissued in a shorter version for the benefit of non-student readers and those possibly daunted by its present bulk. While Stretton chose not to follow that advice, his last major publication focuses concisely and directly on the means by which the increasing scale of economic, environmental, gender and social inequality in this country might be reversed, ‘if a well-led electable political party would give its heart and mind to that work’. *Australia Fair* (UNSW Press, 2005) is a fitting conclusion to a remarkably wide-ranging yet cohesive canon of writing from the most original social thinker and public intellectual of post-war Australia.

Hugh Stretton’s physical persona is well captured by Robert Hannaford in a portrait which won the Peoples’ Choice award at the 1991 Archibald Prize. One former Oxford pupil recalls ‘his great domed forehead, his smile, his quiet unemphatic manner, and his piercing intelligence’; an Adelaide counterpart speaks of him as ‘literally and figuratively a towering presence’. Others have detected a hint of patrician-paternalist ‘*de haut en bas*’, mixed with the Balliol ideal of ‘the man of thought as

the man of action’; Stretton himself claimed, perhaps only half-jokingly, that his three years on the navy’s lower deck had made him ‘a card-carrying member of the Australian working class’. He also characterised himself as an optimist, and a Christian atheist. Other notable personal qualities were quiet courtesy, modesty, generosity of spirit, warmth and wit, a ‘talent for fusing personal whimsy and profound utterance, to scintillating effect’, and always a pragmatic concern to establish and work from facts, not ideology, supposition or theory. A rugby player and Head of the River oarsman in his younger days, he enjoyed family Mirror dinghy sailing, and on at least one occasion creditably padded-up as wicket-keeper for a history staff-student cricket match.

A Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities since 1969 and of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia since 1972, Hugh Stretton, Hon. DLitt (ANU, La Trobe), Hon. LLD (Monash), DUniv (Adelaide, Flinders) was made a Companion in the Order of Australia in 2004. After a long illness, he died in Adelaide from Alzheimer’s disease in July 2015, and was remembered at a memorial service in the University of Adelaide’s Bonython Hall the following month. The Stretton Centre in the northern suburbs of greater Adelaide has been created in his name, to bring together researchers, policy makers, industry and community stakeholders, focusing on projects that will help build more sustainable places in which to live, work and play.

WILFRID PREST FAHA

With grateful thanks to Patsy and Tim Stretton, Peter Burns, Robert Dare, Graeme Davison, Sabina Flanagan, Geoff Harcourt, Doug Munro, Keith Thomas, and Pat Troy, for recollections and other contributions to this obituary.