Student Strikes at Roseworthy Agricultural College

Current students at the Roseworthy Campus will undoubtedly be very surprised to know of the two strikes of past students and one near strike.

The first strike, over the quality and quantity of food being served in the College Dining Room, then a residential college, occurred in 1892.

Newspaper accounts of the first strike are scant; however, the Evening News (Sydney, NSW) reported in its 4 August 1892 edition:

A Students' Strike
ADELAIDE, Wednesday. The students at the Roseworthy Agricultural College recently struck, owing to the alleged poor and insufficient food that was supplied to them. Three ran away, and two were brought back, the other one being expelled for insubordination. It has been arranged that Professor Lowrie (Principal 1888 to 1901) *shall in future have meals with the students.*

More information on the 1892 strike is provided in the Vol. 27 No. 2. edition of The Student, published in December 1931, where a student at that time of the strike, Carl Heyne (RDA 1894) described the circumstances of the strike in some detail.

It was in my junior year that the great College Strike was on. Butter, in the opinion of some, was too limited. A few hogged the lot and the rest got none. The menu, too, was monotonous - plenty of farm mutton, but mostly shoulders and neck stews, our sheep apparently had no hindquarters. Then a beast was killed, and for a long period beef would appear in various guises, finishing up with the veritable salt horse. "Sampson," our giant pedigree Berkshire hog, produced wonderful progeny, and this well fed with kitchen slush, peas and corn, made very fat pork - this was often served up only partially cooked. Jam also was scanty. Plenty of food was available for all, but mismanagement somewhere had dire results.

Combined meetings of Juniors and Seniors were held, and the Pro. was approached, with no results, so a general strike was declared. No work on farm until tucker improved! Lectures went on as usual, but all work on farm was suspended. It lasted three days. On the third day, on entering the dining-room, in front of every student was a plate with a pat of butter and a ticket with his name. We are informed that an allowance of half a pound per week would be served to each - and it was funny to see the plates with particles of butter at each meal varying in size according to the appetite of the owner.

Pro. promised to look into the matter, and we decided to declare the strike off.

The second strike, in 1932, was much more serious and ultimately resulted in the departure of the Principal, Walter Birks.

Born in South Australia in 1886, Walter Birks received his early education at Prince Alfred College, where he matriculated in 1902 and was then employed for several years with G. and R. Wills & Company, a major soft goods wholesaler. In 1905, Birks enrolled at the University of Adelaide to pursue science subjects, including some from the engineering course, and in 1907 transferred to Roseworthy Agricultural College, where he earned a first-class diploma, the College Gold Medal as Dux of his class in 1908, and

a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture in 1910 after completing additional University requirements.

Following graduation, Birks joined the staff of the College as a demonstrator in the science laboratories and conducting original research on the effects of superphosphate on small seed germination.

Birks career quickly progressed through roles such as foreman at the Kybybolite Experiment Farm in 1910, manager of the Booborowie Experiment Farm in 1911, and Inspector of Agriculture in New South Wales in 1913.

In July 1915, Birks enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), serving with the 4th and 5th Field Artillery Brigades in Egypt and France; rising from sergeant to lieutenant through field promotions. In 1918 Birks transferred to the AIF education service as assistant director, where he organised an agricultural training depot in England, and in 1919 was promoted to captain. Upon discharge in 1920 Birks studied plant breeding at Cambridge University and toured agricultural sites in Denmark, Sweden, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand.

On return to Australia, Birks rejoined the New South Wales Department of Agriculture, and in February 1922 he was appointed Principal of Dookie Agricultural College in Victoria, where he reorganised operations and by 1927 had boosted enrolment to capacity with a waiting list.

Birks military-honed leadership skills from World War I service had aided this transition to peacetime administration.

In May 1927, aged 41, Birks became Principal of Roseworthy Agricultural College and introduced innovative annual farmers' schools that drew up to 150 adult students and additional instructors to promote practical agricultural education.

Birks had maintained connections with the broader agricultural education community, notably through his involvement with the Roseworthy Old Collegians Association, including his attendance at the Association's 1926 Annual Dinner, fostering ties that would prove instrumental in his future appointment.

Birks had implemented a strict disciplinary regime at the College, emphasising academic rigor and behavioral standards that contrasted with the more lenient approaches of previous administrations. Influenced by his vision for elevating the institution's standards, he actively sought to suppress practices like the initiation activities directed at first year students, which had long been a tradition at the College.

In April 1930, Birks issued an order limiting the initiation of first year students to only the first week of term, intending to curb what he viewed as excessive bullying and hazing rituals, such as flogging with improvised tools that left students injured. However, this policy did not fully eradicate the practice; students continued initiations secretly, leading to ongoing tensions as Birks responded with punitive measures, including lectures on proper conduct and threats of restrictions on leave and participation in sport and, on occasion, expulsions or withdrawals.

The 1932 strike at the College commenced on 4 January, when all 65 students, aged between 16 and 20, abruptly suspended farm work and other duties at 7.00 AM,

adopting a form of passive resistance to protest the "intolerable treatment" and excessively harsh discipline.

As a result of the strike the South Australian Government appointed Mr. W. R. Kelly, President of the Industrial Court of South Australia, as Royal Commissioner: *to inquire into and report upon the recent 'strike' of the students at Roseworthy Agricultural College and to determine the causes which led to the said 'strike'.*

The inquiry commenced on 2 February 1932 and heard evidence for a total of twenty-one days. Twenty-six of the students and sixteen other witnesses, including ten members of the permanent staff, the Principal, the Director of Agriculture and two ex-members of the staff gave evidence. The students, the members of the permanent staff and the Principal were represented throughout by counsel and officers of the Crown Law Department assisted in the conduct of the inquiry.

The transcript of the proceedings ran to 1,366 pages and numerous documentary exhibits requiring careful examination were presented.

The 116-page Report of the Royal Commissioner, inclusive of three Appendices, was presented on 23 March 1932, and formally *Laid On Table* of the House of Assembly on 7 July 1932.

The Royal Commissioner found that the origin of the strike had occurred in 1930, when four students were expelled for the physical abuse of first year students during a protracted period of initiation.

At that time Birks had indicated that he would not expel of the four students, but he was overruled by the Minister for Agriculture and the four were expelled. The expulsions were subject to a formal Inquiry at the time, and the finding was the expulsions were appropriate. Such was the importance of this event in the lead up to the strike the Royal Commissioner included the Inquiry Report as one of the three Appendices in the Royal Commission Report. The Royal Commissioner found the student body was not informed that the Principal's position had been overruled, and from that point a mistrust of the Principal commenced to manifest and fester.

The Royal Commissioner found that, in the main, the numerous student complaints about the Principal that followed and led to the strike were not justified, but, in the minds of the students, due to the mistrust that had commenced due to the 1930 expulsions, they were regarded as justified.

Matters came to a head after unruly behaviour by some students on New Year's Eve 1931, resulting in Birks, the following day, addressing the students about that behaviour. In the ensuing two days the students, indignant at the way they had been addressed, met on several occasions and decided to strike.

In summary, the Royal Commissioner found that all but a few complaints of the students were justified but also found that Birks had at times been overly disciplinarian and had been at times injudicious in the language that he had used in addressing students, individually, and as a group.

Towards the end of his Report the Royal Commissioner are noted:

It is interesting to notice, in conclusion, an account in an article published in the College Magazine of December 21 at 1931, of another strike at the College in 1893. (The Student Vol. X XV11 No. 2 p. 18). The Royal Commissioner then went on to quote verbatim Carl Heyne's account of the strike in 1892, saying: *Perhaps I shall be pardoned for concluding this Report with the question: Is it no more than a conjecture that the echo of events of nearly forty years ago suggested the particular form of action adopted by the students at the College in January, 1932?*

The Vol. 28 No. 1 edition of The Student, published on 21 December 1932, in the Editorial under the titles **Current Events** and **1932 in Retrospect** stated:

In looking back over the year now drawing to a close, we feel that it has been, perhaps, the most important in our history as a College, and as a servant of the agricultural interests in the State.

The year could hardly have opened more inauspiciously. Arising out of students' pranks on New Year's Eve, an address by the Principal was apparently deeply resented, and on January 4 the students went on strike and refused to return to work until they had been promised an inquiry. The student organisation was such that they carried their point, and work was resumed on January 7.

The inquiry took the form of a Royal Commission and sat for almost a month. During that time nearly half of the students and staff, as well as others previously connected with the College, were called as witnesses. The students' grievances found little sympathy from Mr. President Kelly, and his findings proved to be rather an open one. A great deal of misunderstanding had naturally developed, and Mr. Birks took the wise and generous course in resigning his Principalship.

For an interval the future of the College hung in the balance, and our friends, and, indeed, the whole State, we hope, should be grateful that, in the end, wiser counsels prevailed, and it was decided to continue the College under a Governing Council, instead of directly under the Minister, as previously.

In the circumstances, it was only natural that the Institution should lose a certain amount of public prestige for the time being. The gentleman who comprised the Council are, by their standing in the community and their record of service, a guarantee to the public that the College will now follow the right path, but the speed we make along the road back into public favour is very much in our hands. May we make the most of the opportunities they are creating for us.

The new College year opened with little more than half a quota of students, but we were fortunate having Mr. W. J. Spafford, Deputy-Director of Agriculture, detailed to take control until a new Principal was appointed. Mr. Spafford had served many years on the staff, and he went to work with his characteristic energy to get things going again. He spent three months here, and he gave us an excellent start, especially in the field work, and we owe our fine crops this season as much to his efforts as to the good growing conditions that have been experienced.

Our new Principal, Dr. Allan R. Callaghan, was appointed in June, and he arrived at the College and took over from Mr. Spafford on July 13th. We know from experience of him

that his interest and abundant energy are entirely devoted to the College - he has rapidly earned the goodwill of all - and we now look forward to a long period of quiet and useful

After resigning Birks did not return to prominent roles in agricultural education or government service. Birks resided in South Australia for the remainder of his life, maintaining a low public profile until his death on 17 January 1960.

Dr Callaghan's distinguished role as Principal of the College continued until 1949, punctuated by, commencing in 1942 chairmanship of the Crown Lands Development Committee, with the responsibility of devising a scheme to resettle return service personnel on farms and, also in 1942, secondment to the Commonwealth Department of War Organisation of Industry (WOI) as Assistant Director for Rural Industry.

In his address at his final Speech Day on 4 March 1949, Dr Callaghan, reflecting on his appointment to the position of Principal in 1932, stated:

"I came after troublesome times and a Royal Commission. These troubles and loss of prestige had shaken the very foundations of the College and threatened its existence. The Public Service Commissioner at the time, Mr. L. C. Hunkin, in the crisp, direct manner that was his, gave me my terms of reference the day before I began at College. Either I was to reshape the place and put it back on its feet, or it would close. So, it was obvious what had to be done.

The near strike occurred in 1969, during the Principalship of Bob Herriot, and relates to the gating of almost all of the entire student body after an off-College party at Templers.

Graham Brookman (RDA 1970) indicated, in an email to the author on 1 December 2025, that the day following the party the Principal: *cancelled all leave for the long weekend for those who participated (almost the whole College) and instituted a hard labour penalty. Given that a number of students had 'a previous misdemeanour' on record, (making too much noise at the pool) they were suspended. A general meeting of the students considered a motion to go on strike, as had been done by the students in 1932, which led to a hearing in the Industrial Court and the resignation of the Principal W R Birks. However, the 1969 motion to strike was narrowly defeated.*

The suspended students referred to were the five inaugural members of the Roseworthy Agricultural College Master Axeman's Association.