

Obituary

ALAN CROWTHER

As I was about to leave the U.K. for New Zealand, I asked a mutual colleague, "How shall I recognise him?" His reply was "Look for the farmer's boy." Some time later I was greeted on the wharf in Lyttelton by a bustling figure of a rubicund and weather beaten countenance, an ageless, if somewhat elderly, farmer's boy. This was Alan Crowther, the then recently appointed first Professor of Psychology in the newly emergent University of Canterbury. Many of his students, past and present, still thought of him and referred to him as 'the Doctor', or more familiarly 'Doc' and to them and me he was and always will be "Mr Psychology" in New Zealand.

Alan Crowther was born in England in 1913 and attended Sherborne School. In 1931 he entered Clare College, Cambridge as an exhibitioner, later taking a first class honours in both natural and moral sciences. Cambridge psychology was led at the time by Bartlett, one of the early leaders who fostered both pure and applied experimental research, who gathered around him in a graduate school many who later would spread his eclectic approach throughout British and overseas universities. Alan Crowther was one of these who adopted Bartlett's views, believing that applied research was just as important as pure, theoretical studies and that getting the research right was more important than instant publication. His own Ph.D. applied the best contemporary theories to the practice of vocational guidance and in those early days he spent some time working for the South Metropolitan Gas Board and, under the auspices of the M.R.C., with the Industrial Health Research Board who, as inheritors of the old Industrial Fatigue Research group, carried out the classical studies on the psychology of safety and accidents. Crowther's early work here, stood him in good stead when much later in New Zealand he was asked to investigate the causes of a number of minor accidents which beset the young National Airways Corporation. Later, I was to observe that he was never a happy flyer — perhaps he knew too much!

Marriage to Dorothy ("Dolly") McGuinness brought Alan Crowther to New Zealand, where in 1938 he became a temporary lecturer in

Victoria University College, Wellington, moving to Canterbury University College in a junior position in 1939. Then, and immediately after World War II, psychology was taught from within the Department of Philosophy and from the problems inherent in this situation, and his determination to make psychology an independent discipline, came his lasting involvement in university politics. On the death of the head of department, Professor Sutherland, he argued for the good of psychology, but to the detriment of his own career and status, that the chair should remain a philosophy one and that psychology should be detached with a senior lecturer, himself, in charge. Not until 1957 did he achieve a separate chair, to which he was appointed, though his foray into university administration had already led him to a one year seat on the University Council and a term as Dean of Arts.

No doubt his ability to manipulate committees and to cut through the red-tape and petty bureaucracy of the old University of New Zealand was honed to fine sharpness by his war-time service in the army Medical Corps. At one stage Alan Crowther was running a military hospital, fully staffed by Nurses, but with not a single resident Doctor. "You don't need Doctors in a hospital," he remarked, "they only get in the Nurses' way — and you can always call one in if you need one!" Another Crowtherism suggested that "the most effective Committee is one of two members — with one absent." On one occasion, he persuaded the Arts Faculty to appoint him as a one-man sub-committee to investigate a matter, now long forgotten, to which he was violently opposed. About a year later, one of his least favourite fellow Faculty members asked the Dean if there was not a Committee appointed to investigate the matter in question. Alan Crowther jumped to his feet and informed the Dean the Committee had met in Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington and that it was its unanimous decision that no further action be taken! Two Faculty members, both also members of the Department of Psychology, who were the only ones present who were party to what really happened, had problems hiding their mirth. Not only the Arts Faculty, but the Science

Faculty also enjoyed his presence and benefitted from his experienced counsel. His personal status ensured the acceptance of psychology as a natural science and as Dean of that Faculty, as Pro-Chancellor of the University and a member of Council from 1965 to 1972, his universally respected work and involvement gave a symbiotic status to his parent discipline.

Alan Crowther's significant and lasting contribution to psychology lies not in his own research, but rather in the establishment of a Department in which, in his own words, "research would naturally develop and flourish". A member of academic staff could expect Alan Crowther to read all journals as they arrived and selectively draw to his or her attention those articles which were relevant to their current research or which might act as a stimulus to them to set up an experiment or study in a new area. If a staff member's results posed problems, or his theoretical analysis or discussion faltered, Crowther could be counted on to be able to draw on his vast "storehouse of knowledge" to point to a possible solution. He had little time for grapeshot techniques or data-crunching of vast-matrices to see what emerged. He encouraged

his staff towards carefully planned research, under controlled conditions so that if a significant finding were there it would emerge as an obvious conclusion. An academic Crowtherism was that there were only two weights in psychology formulae — one and zero. The Department, and indeed New Zealand psychology, also benefitted from the many students drawn to the discipline by his inspired undergraduate teaching. For many years he gave all the lectures in Stage I Psychology, presenting without notes to an ever attentive class, a masterly exposition of psychology as an academic discipline. Many students who enrolled to fill a gap in their subsidiary subjects, stayed to major in psychology and later advance to honours.

At times, Alan Crowther could be taciturn or bad tempered — one learned to avoid him when he arrived singing "Oh Worship the king". His wit could be cutting and he did not suffer fools at all, let alone gladly. Some of his schemes were Machiavellian, whilst at times he behaved like an Irish Leprachaun, determined to have fun whilst upsetting someone — anyone. A complex character, "the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up, and say to all the World, 'This was a man!'".