

**Ralph Spaulding. *William Henry Williams: Tasmania's First Professor of English*
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William Henry Williams: Tasmania's First Professor of English by Ralph Spaulding is a history of Williams's institutional life, first as a teacher at two Methodist boys' schools and then, from 1893, at the University of Tasmania. Spaulding writes of a time in which an academic department usually consisted of a single male professor, who taught a relatively small number of students at all levels via lectures and examination.

Early chapters of this book focus on key phases of Williams's life: as a student of Classics (Latin and Greek) at Cambridge University; as Classics master at the newly founded Leys School in Cambridge; as founding headmaster of Sydney's Newington College. It can be hard to remember that all three tiers of education—primary, secondary, and tertiary—were effectively in development at the same time during this period, but Spaulding places the development of the schools in a wider context. Later chapters that focus on the University of Tasmania are more detailed, covering topics including curriculum, examination, and the student body, up until Williams's retirement in 1925, at the age of 73. Appendices range from poems by Williams and a list of his publication to details of curriculum, sample examination papers, and tables summarising the number of English students and the distribution of their results. There is also a chapter on the wider discipline in British and Australian universities, and a late chapter on Williams's retirement and family life.

What runs through this account is the shaping effect of religion. Spaulding suggests that Williams, small of stature, sober of habit, obtained his headmastership and his university position in part because of connections formed when he was at the Leys School. While at the University of Tasmania, he was deacon at a church in which the university's founding Vice-Chancellor was the minister. The influence could also be negative: Williams left Newington after the school council decided the headmaster should be a clergyman, something that must have been galling when he seems to have been, according to Spaulding's report, both liked and lauded.

Spaulding mentions only that Williams "absorbed" his Methodism. In a time when Anglophone debates about higher education and the interpretation of texts were informed by debates among religionists, I wondered how his approach to the Bible might have helped shape Williams's sense of the value of canonical works of English literature or informed his understanding of reading. Answering such questions is, as Spaulding acknowledges, difficult because of the choice of a biographical subject who has left no personal archive. Nevertheless, the sources do allow some telling vignettes, as in a brisk memo from Williams (as Dean of Arts) showing his frustration with colleagues who failed to meet deadlines.

In Spaulding's account, Williams's university life seems to have been both less energetic and less rewarding than his work as a schoolteacher and headmaster. One key job was giving extension lectures that aimed to attract students, as well as prepare them for tertiary study. A particular point of contention was the expectation that academics should travel regularly to Launceston to deliver lectures and mentor students. Perhaps with a grin, the author notes the "violent and consistent hostility" from Tasmania's north to the very idea of a university in Hobart.

Workloads, travel, and student recruitment were among several bones of contention between what would now be called "management" and academics at the University of Tasmania. The "pragmatism"—Spaulding's restrained term—of the founding administrators is evident in this comparison of Williams with his closest rival for that first lectureship:

[Appointing] Williams gives us hostages that Webb (who has a pension, is editor of books, etc) does not. Williams must succeed here at any cost to himself of work and trouble, for if he fails he has nothing to fall back on, and would be more or less discredited. This is a pledge that we will get his best energies. (76)

As this archival gem demonstrates, the book shows vast and careful research. But the generally immaculate writing makes the hiccups in copy-editing and typesetting stand out. Neither the titles of books nor periodicals are italicised in the notes, though they are in the Bibliography. The latter places authors' first names first (Edward E. Arber . . . Matthew Arnold). There are some typos, including with dates and names of authors, and a persistent neglect of compound adjectives ("eighteenth century literature" for "eighteenth-century literature").

These are glitches amidst what are at times extraordinary feats of reading and organisation. For example, Spaulding has matched student examination questions to lists of textbooks and recommended readings, including page numbers, to show the very fine degree to which students were being asked to regurgitate information from secondary texts. Such work suggests that, under Williams, students were expected to learn facts about literary history rather than learning to read and then venturing an interpretation, although it is difficult to be sure about this in the absence of completed answer booklets.

At times Spaulding seems a little too reticent to venture interpretation. But the book is at its best when working this way, as in the conclusion:

The obvious change from the highly motivated extroverted leadership that Williams displayed as a young teacher and then headmaster [at Newington] to a somewhat withdrawn, self-contained and dutiful member of the University staff suggests a sense of frustrated ambition which eventually would be sublimated by retreating to the quieter life of research as a man of letters. (227)

Here it is important to see, as Spaulding argues, that the move from a headmastership to a lectureship in a university with just three full-time teaching staff was likely neither seen, nor experienced, as a promotion. Indeed, as the comment quoted above implies, there was some chance that the university might fail if its teachers were to prove incapable of attracting students. In defiance of such gloom, though, William Henry Williams has found a sympathetic and generous chronicler of his professional life in a book that will be of interest to historians of the discipline of English in Australia, and to those interested in the history of the University and of Tasmania more generally.

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