

A Personal Memoire of Dr Harold Wood
after reading the paper
*Dr Harold Wood: A Notable Methodist (1896-89)*¹
and a few years later the full book² of the same name.

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While I feel the Dr Wood would have approved of the diminutive title of Professor Ian Breward's paper and subsequent book, I would label my mentor "A Methodist Champion". While admitting bias, I can see his championship in this rewarding book in terms of his contributions to the history of Methodism and to Australian life. To me Dr Wood was a humble, educated, intelligent and gifted man.

I met with Ian Breward to discuss Dr Wood, and enjoyed the memories our conversation evoked, even though I only knew Dr Wood from his St Paul's Uniting Church of Nungerner Street Deepdene phase when he was already 71. This meant that for me the previous seven decades of his life was largely an image pieced together in my mind from snippets of his sermons that referred to Tonga, the Methodist Church hierarchy and his personal experiences, supplemented by our intimate conversations over the next decade. The recent publication of Breward's work has allowed me to consider my own relationship to Dr Wood in a more informed light, and to understand more about him, and of how greatly he influenced my life. In fact, I find it curious that there are many more parallels in our respective lives than I can understand from the relatively short period that our lives overlapped. So, it is with myself that this note is concerned, as parts of Dr Wood's life story reminded me of my own, though we are quite different people.

Dr Wood's childhood poverty is of another time and generation, yet his 'boy's promise' being encouraged by those whose path he crossed and his 'independence of mind' bear some similarities to my childhood, particularly later childhood. In his youth 'his religious views were also changing', which led him from his parents' Salvation Army to the Methodists and an important mentor – Benjamin Danks – who instructed him in his Local Preachers' class. In a different and less religious time and environment, I shifted from what would have been an Anglican background to Methodist, and it was Dr Wood's Local Preachers' class that informed my changing youthful views, in fact mollifying the wider influences of the time of politics, university, cars and girls. Just as the young Dr Wood 'was greatly influenced through reading improving books', so was I through my teens and later. 'Though intensely competitive, he took no lasting part in any sport' was a comment that could equally be made about me.

DrWood's penchant for simultaneous studies while working also resonated, and even though life might have been easier in post-war Australia, I note that few of my peers have accepted the opportunities and challenges of working and studying at the same time. The only way I can see Dr Wood's influence in my case is through his encouraging me to

enrol in his Local Preaching Certificate course at the same time as I was undertaking a demanding university course. I still recall being moved when he once praised me privately for my studious attention to our course readings. His views of conscription and the Vietnam war empowered me to uncharacteristic political engagement as a 17-18 year old for even though 'he deplored violent protest, [he] welcomed student protests over Vietnam'. And a few years after that 'he wrote an article for the young men setting out the principles to follow in choosing a wife' in addition to giving me very specific advice before I married, which I ignored.

Dr Wood's time in Tonga featured frequently in his sermons and in conversations of great moments shared in our studies. And this may well have influenced my choice of career. Breward quotes him 'I believe that we at Deepdene will do even more than we have already done for God's unfortunate children in other lands', and notes that 'compassion for the hungry millions was a regular emphasis'. He chose Tonga and a missionary role, while in my era – despite applying for a couple of agricultural missionary posts – I was pleased to be engaged by the burgeoning government industry of aid where I felt real progress could be made. Neither his nor my countries of work had ever been officially colonized, unusual states for the Asia and Pacific region. And just as 'Tonga had a subsistence economy', so had Thailand in areas away from Bangkok. Dr Wood 'speedily mastered Tongan' when other foreigners did not, and I did the same with the Thai language. He was around 40 years old when wrote 'The History and Geography of Tonga', which was 'for many years the only book to introduce readers to a complex history', and I was in my 40s when I conceived the book that became 'Thai Agriculture', which has been a significant text in relevant universities and the most viewed of my works on the internet.

It may be thought that we differed in our appetites for cultural diversities and certainly mine was more omnivorous than Dr Wood's, yet his 'stamina' and 'stewardship' of time are both adequate descriptions of my own concentration, whether in Asia or elsewhere, on accomplishing tasks, writing papers and taking on additional responsibilities, especially when I read that 'holidays were ... usually combined with ... business'. While in Tonga, in addition to merging recalcitrant churches, typing out minutes of meetings in both English and Tongan, creating and editing a church paper and performing his ministerial and missionary duties, Dr Wood 'in his spare time began to study for a doctorate'. In Thailand, I completed my doctorate in addition to my employment in research, editing papers for a local journal, writing papers for other journals, drafting chapters for a book, and travelling to other agricultural sites and countries. And in terms of books, Dr Wood library was soaked by a cyclone 'and books had to be painstakingly dried out' immediately before he entered a new phase of his life, and my somewhat meagre library was similarly damaged in Cyclone Tracey, which was a factor in my moving to Thailand, which began a new phase of my life.

After Dr Wood had left Tonga and became Principal of Methodists Ladies College and the Methodist Conference, he 'wrote the minutes beforehand and rarely found it necessary to change them', which was the same advice I received from another mentor – Prof Derek Tribe – when I joined the University of Melbourne as Dean. And just as Dr

Wood had merged churches in Tonga and later was a major figure in the merger that would create The Uniting Church of Australia, so I was to take on the role of merging six disparate colleges of agriculture with the University. In both of our cases, opposition was strong and many observers did not expect success – but we each succeeded in our respective ways. This may be due to Dr Wood having been ‘a rather directive chairman’ just as I was within the intransigent University, yet we both ensured ‘that varied views were heard’ but did not allow them to unduly influence the inevitable. In the merger messages we both insisted that ‘unity did not mean uniformity’, and we each relied on historical information for our decisions – Dr Wood from his studies of church history and me from a specific study of agricultural education and its specific application to the Victorian case. Merging cultures of disparate organizations led me a process of regular regular overnight meetings that deepened working relationships, which parallels Dr Wood’s Joint Committee for Church Unification meeting ‘eight times for two to three days’. His plea ‘for acceptance of the Basis, for the three churches could not afford to fail yet again’ was echoed in my ‘we have failed three times already, there is now no choice’. I know such parallels can be explained in the commonality of human behaviour, but the parallels nevertheless delight me.

Around the age of 60, Dr Wood’s ‘intellectual gifts, his administrative skills, his commitment’ led to his election as President of the General Conference. While he was a greater man than I could have been, it is also humbling to find at a similar age various accolades were conferred on me, mainly for adventurous work in Asia and academia.

When I read that Dr Wood ‘travelled 6,500 miles in 11 weeks’ in Europe and Britain, I – with all those trained in Methodism – I immediately saw a reference to John Wesley’s thousands of horseback miles for preaching engagements, and I know Dr Wood used Wesley as one of his life models, even as he recommended me to do. An energetic ‘steam engine in trousers’, as Dr Wood’s energy was noted by his peers, so in a similar way my energy to ‘get things done’ was often commented on, which included accepting workloads far in excess of what is now considered acceptable. Such small revelations from Breward’s biography enhanced the Dr Wood I had already known well, even when he remained an aloof or revered figure to many at our church. He indulged my excesses as those of youth and encouraged my enquiries, even when they strayed from conventional church wisdom and his own. They subsequently strayed very far, to my great benefit.

But perhaps they may not have strayed as far as some think! For when I next read that Dr Wood had ‘pointed out that Methodism combined Catholicity, Protestantism, Puritanism and Evangelism’ share methodical values absent from secularism and humanism, I saw elements of my own ecumenism. And as this led him to be concerned that increasing numbers of persons ‘did not know their heritage’, so I have found myself lamenting the same in one of my books, even noting that my assumption that peers had an underpinning cultural education that informed their philosophical fads was ultimately false.

Dr Wood’s background with loving Salvation Army parents who had both come from alcoholism-affected families led to his Puritanical view of drinking, on which I disagreed

with him even while in his Local Preaching Classes, declining the same naive oaths as those of the Rachebites that I had declined to sign as a 13 year-olds at school. As a 'strenuous advocate for total abstinence, refusing to attend even wedding receptions where alcohol was served', I felt especially privileged that he agreed to make an exception for me, whom he had a few days earlier invested as the only Methodist Local Preacher to complete his course. But when I read that much earlier 'he supported a change to the rule which forbade dancing on Methodist property', I realized that I had projected some other conservative views onto him. His objection to gambling has stuck with me, not as rule or fear, but just as common sense; others have suggested to me that I have gambled in other ways in my life but this is the nonsense used as justification for the inaction of unquestioned lives. But his wowsersism was a badge of honour, and in some ways is similar to the feeling I have when criticized for my conservative arguments about the social costs of gambling, mass edutainment, free-traded-food, responsibility-free rights and so on. And for those affected by their own actions in such cases, my association with Buddhism has shown me that compassion is much more than pity, which Breward then reveals to me as the 'intelligent compassion' preached by Dr Wood. It seems to me that what I didn't learn directly from him, I was primed to learn in other ways through my life.

When Dr Wood is described as 'a prolific author' I identified immediately, although his 'clear mind which enabled him to type with a minimum of revision' has taken me decades of self-training to approach. And when I learned that Dr Wood's doctoral thesis was published as a book I am amazed that my doctorate followed the same pattern, and that I have encouraged Asian colleagues to do similarly for significant works.

There are so many other parallels and influences, but this is more than enough to illustrate both my debt and origins to this remarkable man. So when Breward says that Dr Wood 'began a local preachers' class ... Professor Lindsay Falvey, one of the group, deeply appreciated Wood's teaching and the challenge offered by their discussions', it is correct in every sense. It is one reason I dedicated the book 'Religion and Agriculture' to him. Dr Wood's influence in my life continues today.

Lindsay Falvey, February 2010 & 2013

¹ Presentation given as The Gordon Rowe Memorial Lecture on 17th November 2006 and published by the Historical Society of the Uniting Church of South Australia.

² Ian Breward (2013) Dr Harold Wood: A Notable Methodist. Uniting Academic Press, Melbourne. Pp272.