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Book review: Gissing, P. *A History of Orange Agricultural College. Orange, NSW: Australian Farm Business Management Network, 2009, xii + 112 pp., \$38.50*

Introduction

Earlier this year, the Australian Farm Business Management Network published 'A history of Orange Agricultural College', written by Philip Gissing.

As the names implies, the book chronicles the development of the former Orange Agricultural College, which, from humble beginnings in 1973, went on to become the largest provider of rural management education in Australia, before it was absorbed into the University of Sydney in 2000 and then Charles Sturt University in 2005.

Gissing tutored in history and sociology at the College campus, when it was part of the University of Sydney's Centre for Regional Education in the early 2000s. While at the Orange Campus, he began his archival research into the history of the former College.

He draws on this archival material to compile a detailed account of the development, growth and changes that took place within the College during almost three decades of what was a particularly turbulent time in the tertiary education sector—as both State and Federal Governments implemented significant education reforms.

Battle for independence

Indeed the story of the College is very much a story of its battle to maintain its independence and identity as it adapted to these reforms while working frantically to ensure it delivered new and innovative course programs that met the demands of both the agricultural sector and various government departments.

Gissing's history provides the reader with a fascinating 'behind-the-scenes' insight into the operations of the College, beginning in the late 1960s, when the idea of a new agricultural college was first mooted.

There were already four agricultural colleges in NSW at this time—Hawkesbury, Wagga Wagga, Yanco and CB Alexander Presbyterian Agricultural College (the forerunner to Tocal College). But there was still a gap in this sector—these colleges delivered programs focussing on applied agriculture; a new college was needed with a focus on farm business management.

Strong advocate

Perhaps the single greatest advocate for this need was the late Len Pockley, a sheep grazer from the Goulburn district of NSW. Pockley features prominently in Gissing's history—a reflection of his involvement in and influence on the life of the College during several decades.

A graduate of the University of Sydney's veterinary science program, Pockley became the driving force for the establishment of a new agricultural college that would actively promote the importance of young farmers being trained in farm business management, as well as practical farming techniques.

Pockley (1915–2004) had great influence in the state's agricultural sector—having many key connections in the primary industries as well as within the government. Fortunately, about the time he began his lobbying, the State Government was conducting a review of agricultural education in NSW, so his proposal was favourably received.

After the College was established, Pockley played a prominent role in its early operations and development, serving on both the Board of Management and its replacement body, the Advisory Council, for many years. Indeed, he had a hand in many of the major decisions and changes implemented at the College during its first decade or so.

Gissing uses a quote from Gerry Gleeson, the former head of the NSW Premier's Department, to highlight the contribution of Pockley to the College. The occasion was Pockley's farewell dinner, on 5 December 1985:

When the history of the Orange Agricultural College is written and particularly if the historian can have access to the papers where the proposal was first discussed then it will become obvious that Len Pockley was the moving force and the catalyst for the establishment of the College. Agricultural education will therefore be indebted to him.

Len Pockley has been one of the outstanding personalities in the field of agriculture and agricultural education and many of us within the Government sector have profited immensely by our association with him. His ability to see through the problem and reduce it down to its simple parts made it a refreshing experience to be associated with him on committees. His quick turn of phrase and his agricultural metaphors made discussions not only productive but entertaining.

I am personally indebted to Len. I regard him as a great Australian.

Positives and negatives

As well as being an historian, Gissing is an accomplished all-round musician. With this book, he is 'on-song' in terms of what he has set out to achieve—that is, to detail the economic, political and social contexts in which the College was founded and operated.

But for me, the book is slightly 'off-key' in terms of providing a comprehensive account of the life of the College. The author makes use of a wide range of archival materials, including agendas, minutes and reports of the College's Board of Management and Advisory Council meetings, College memos and correspondence to staff and students, staff newsletters, academic papers, media clippings, broadcasts, transcripts and press releases, personal correspondence of key staff over the years, as well as State and Federal Government reports on the education sector.

What the book lacks is personal accounts of life at the College. Given that thousands of students graduated from the College over the years and many hundreds of staff worked there, there is a vast untapped resource in terms of anecdotes and recollections that would have added colour and greatly enhanced the overall account. And these personal accounts would have been every bit as valuable, if not more valuable, than the archival material that has been used.

Gissing recognised this point at the book's launch in Orange in March, when he conceded he had not had sufficient time or the resources to collect personal anecdotes and accounts.

Thorough, easy to read

Nevertheless, the book is easy to read, well written and thorough in what it covers. And given the College made a profound positive contribution to Australian agriculture, the book will be of great interest to anyone who was associated with the former College or anyone connected to or interested in agriculture or, in particular, agricultural education.

Gissing's 112-page book includes dozens of archival photos. It comes with a CD containing more than 350 historical photos relating to the College. Copies are available through Kerry Madden—ph (02) 6365 7500 or email kmadden@csu.edu.au

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