

Chapter 6, To the Cavendish Laboratory of the University of Cambridge 1931

Joe Pawsey and the Founding of Radio Astronomy in Australia, Early Discoveries from the Sun to the Cosmos

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From 1931 (September, arrival in the UK) to 1939 (December, departure for Sydney), Joe Pawsey wrote over 189 letters to his parents in Victoria. These letters were discovered in the last few years at the house of Hastings Pawsey in Sydney, clearly provided to the Pawsey family by Margaret Lade Pawsey. Starting in 2016, Hastings and his wife, Elizabeth, transcribed these mainly handwritten letters. (Starting in 1935, many letters were typed.) No copies of his parents' letters are available.

This correspondence provided a weekly summary of Joe's activities; in 1932, 1933 and 1934 there were roughly 45 letters per year. In subsequent years, until 1939, the number of letters reduced: 25 in 1936, only 2 in 1937, with no family letters located in the archive 1938 to 1940. Likely the family letters were not preserved.

The letters provide abundant details about all aspects of Joe's life: Sidney Sussex College, the University of Cambridge, the Cavendish Laboratory, the Director Lord Rutherford (1871-1937), Joe's advisor J.A. Ratcliffe and his thesis research, "Properties of Down-Coming Low Frequency Waves from the Ionosphere". In addition, the letters provide information and details of Joe's interactions with friends and colleagues at Cambridge as well as with a number of girl friends in the UK, most young Australian women. Joe reported many details of his interactions with these ladies, often in a frank manner, to his parents. He even discussed his philosophy of marriage with his parents (who would be the ideal companion?) as well as the relative intelligence of women compared to himself. Joe also supplied many details of his activities in the Dominions Services and Students Hospitality Scheme of Lady Frances Ryder and Celia Macdonald of the Isles (see main text); Christmas and New Years' visits to stately homes were common. An additional source of information about these social activities and some of the vacation trips is the collection of F.H. Nicoll ("Ted"), Joe's Canadian 1851 Exhibition Scholar colleague and friend, who would become Joe's brother-in-law in 1935.¹ During two trips to Germany (1932 and 1933 with W.J. "Bill" Henderson, a Canadian colleague at the Cavendish- see NRAO ONLINE.26), Joe witnessed the election of Hitler (letter 19 April 1932) and a massive Nazi demonstration (400,000 people) at Nuremberg (10 October 1933). Joe's applications for two jobs at the Radio Research Board at Slough as well as two positions with the Australian Radio Research Board were also described. These applications did not succeed.

¹ Provided by Nicoll's daughter, Patricia Agnew in 2008. Correspondence F.H. Nicoll with his parents in Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Joe wrote several letters to his parents with complex philosophical or political themes; in an undated letter from 1933, Pawsey discussed the relative merits of democracy, socialism and communism:

You query my speaking of Communism as something in the nature of a religion. What do you understand by a religion? It is not a belief which governs conduct—a belief in a more or less complete philosophy of life which must be sufficiently strong to make a man make self-sacrifices of a very considerable kind? Is the ideal of Communism the relief of mankind from the burden of striving laboriously for mere pittance so as to be free from the fear of starvation and able to indulge somewhat in the so called higher pleasures of life, art, philosophy a good ideal? At present the great majority of mankind have their energies so misdirected that they work long hours for a bare subsistence.

Additional details in the letters summarised Pawsey's life at Cambridge including his participation in sports: cricket and Australian rules football (game at Oxford), ice-skating in Cambridge and skiing in Austria.

During the controversial and decisive Australian Federal election of 19 December 1931, Pawsey exchanged several letters with his parents, both stalwarts of the Australian United Country Party. This election was dominated by the Depression, the existing Labor government of James Scullin coming to power in 1929 two days before the Wall Street crash of 24 October 1929. Scullin was defeated by the newly formed United Australia Party as the Nationalist Party and a number of prominent Labor dissidents lead by Joseph Lyons, who became the leader of the newly merged party; Lyons was in favour of orthodox finance and deflationary economics. In the election the UAP formed a coalition with the Country party, the two parties soundly defeating the sitting government. Lyons became the new prime minister of Australia, serving until his death in 1939. On 15 December 1931, Pawsey wrote:

The Australian General election is on Saturday. I expect the great ignorant frightened vote will put the "same finance" crowd in. I feel these people see a symptom in the budget deficiency and considering it the ill itself try to patch it up. It is [looking as if one is] attaching great importance to the spots in an attack of measles and painting the subject in order to obliterate them. If the patient has great faith in the resulting monotone he may recover, if he merely waits to see the effect he will be worse. I see [Ted] Theodore [a supporter of inflationary, Keynesian policies, appointed Treasurer by Scullin in early 1931] has financial ideas which will damn him without thought in the minds of many people. I wonder if he is a rogue. He got clean away

from the trial [for corruption]. In either case is it possibly not better to be under a capable rogue than a well-meaning fool when the ship is in danger of sinking.²

I wonder whether you are voting C.P. [Country Party] from sheer force of habit.

One thing I think you should be thankful for is that the protectionist policy of the past has put Australia in a way to being self-supporting. That may be extremely useful—if it has not been so already. I incline to the view that the only form of international trade which can be indulged in in the present state of the world without serious danger of friction is tourist traffic.

² In several letters, Pawsey's mother had clearly expressed anxiety about the collapse of agricultural prices as the Depression deepened in Australia in the early 1930s.