The difficulties as well as the excitement of bringing into being a new university could be better understood. These essays should make a considerable contribution to that end. It would do no harm if those who try to change universities, especially if they try to do so from without and rather rapidly, would ponder upon these things. One of the difficulties about creating a new university is that we try to do in a short period of years what has in the past taken decades if not centuries of slow growth and changing character for these institutions to reach their present usefulness. This is apparent in three ways.

Whether by accident or design universities in the past have gained a certain aura from the place which they occupy, and in turn they have contributed to that place. It is impossible to think of Marburg or Heidelberg, Bologna, Oxford or Berkeley without thinking of its university. These places hold the loyalty of their alumni, those who have been nurtured there. One of the intangible things about a university is its sense of place. The ambience is a part of the condition of learning. Learning needs time and space within which to flourish. Older universities could grow from small beginnings, shaping their environment. New universities, like Aphrodite, are required to spring from the sea fully formed— or almost so.

Hence it is inescapable that there should be a master plan, for the landscape and its buildings. It is inevitable (or almost so) that the modern university should have a campus and not simply infiltrate the town as in Uppsala or Cambridge. This encourages some people to think that they can see the end from the beginning, that god-like they can shape our ends, rough hew them how we will. The history of universities suggests that it is by growth from within, and gifts and understanding from without, that they gain many of their virtues and values. This is a book about beginnings, and only about ends in that those beginnings were principled. La Trobe University was founded by men and women who knew, or thought they knew what a university existed for, the promotion of learning, which would involve research and teaching; and it was their job to start it on its way. They could from the beginning do something about the beauty and the convenience of the environment; and visiting that university today he would be a brave man who denied that they had made a bonny start.

Secondly universities have grown up slowly over many years as communities of scholars, the teachers and the taught, working and to some extent living in close proximity one to another. They lived and worked so close together that they often argued and fought among themselves, but more importantly they learnt one from the other. In this they were like families, they had their infant rages and adolescent turmoil, their middle-aged complacency and their old-aged crustiness. They had their ups and downs, but by and large they were mighty interesting places in which to live; they provided a secure place in which to learn, and to learn not only subjects of study but also to learn about life. The advantage of being brought up in a family is that it is impossible to believe that one created it, and while it is easy to destroy, it is likely to survive our individual bad temper and for most of us who do not write novels or short stories it wins our affection and even our respect.

One of the difficulties about founding a modern university is that it has to be brought into being instantly. It is as though you never had to roast or grind beans in order to brew coffee, it
is there in a tin, or cook porridge, all you need to do is add the water and salt. In the sixties instant universities were brought into being all over the Western world and expected to behave like mature communities. It is not surprising that they did not always do so. Something of the story of an attempt to create a human environment at La Trobe University, to bring into being a place where people could meet and study and live together transcending traditional divisions, something of that story, with its successes and failures, is told with considerable honesty in the following pages.

In this connection one thing should be said which some of the contributors would be too modest to say on their own account, too humble indeed to be aware of: La Trobe University was extraordinarily fortunate in being able to recruit as some of its centrally placed figures men and women who were already experienced, indeed in some cases distinguished, university figures, and who were determined to make this ‘instant’ academic community work. It would be invidious to mention many names, but the way in which the Chairman of the Interim Council, the first Chancellor, bound the members of that Council into a common purpose ought to be recorded; and David (and Beverley) Myers were from the beginning at the centre of a community which for all the quirkiness which characterises any academic community, or perhaps because of it, was a society of friends. So many public policies have the effect of setting people against one another, are destructive of creative thought and relationships of trust, that one comes to value more and more the builders of community life. We had them in the early days at La Trobe.

The third way in which universities have in the past had time to grow and learn to live is in relation to the surrounding community. Certainly they have been founded by princes and great benefactors, but frequently without being told how they must respond, at least in detail. They have been related to the learned professions for which they provide practitioners but in an atmosphere of give and take. They have learnt gradually how to relate their fundamental and applied studies to the needs of the commercial and industrial world in which they are placed. Today they are expected to respond to national needs defined in terms which satisfy bureaucrats and politicians. Today there is much talk about accountability which has to be to a government that provides almost all the university’s financial support and must by the nature of the case put the short term interests of the national economy before other considerations. In these conditions the integrity of a university which has a mind and purpose of its own, and an institutional dignity to be respected, count for little. The universities are not regarded as relatively autonomous institutions to be consulted, but agencies to be instructed. Their officers are not seen as senior academic figures but as senior executive officers, their councils like the board of directors of a public company. The managerial model takes over from that of a democratic state within a state, wherein formulations of policy and resolution of conflict is by way of reasonable discourse.

La Trobe as a university has a particularly important part to play in the current, threatened university scene. It has little (a little but only a little) in the way of professional faculties. It has to justify itself on grounds other than utilitarian. It has the opportunity to show that knowledge has more than instrumental value. Its schools probe the mysteries of the natural world around us, physical and biological, they disclose to us the depths of which the humanities speak and which the social sciences would analyse. These things should be known, and what is known of them should be passed on to succeeding generations in ways that expand and enhance that knowledge. The result will be that new things will be said and understood which were seen differently or but dimly perceived before. Perhaps above all La Trobe University will send into the community men and women (many more women than before) who have learnt to think, and to think critically. Many will come not because they want to be trained or qualified for particular jobs in society: some will come for that reason and will be none the worse for that if their ‘training’ is in the context of learning; most will come because they want to be better educated, training will come later. They will be drawn from the many ethnic backgrounds which characterise the new Australia and especially the new Victoria. They will be richer in mind and more sensitive in spirit than if they had not entered this
University; and they will look back with gratitude to the years spent at La Trobe. Indeed in an important sense they will never leave the University in loyalty or affection.

That at least was part of the hope of those who founded this University, and the following pages record some of the ways in which that hope is being realised.