

# Religious Education and Freedom of Religion and Belief

Stephen Parker, Rob Freathy and Leslie J. Francis (eds)



Peter Lang

# RELIGION, EDUCATION AND VALUES

What opportunities and challenges are presented to religious educators across the globe by the basic human right to freedom of religion and belief? To what extent does religious education facilitate or inhibit freedom of religion in schools? What contribution can religious education make to freedom in the modern world? This volume suggests answers to these and related questions by drawing together a selection of the papers delivered at the seventeenth session of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values held in Ottawa in 2010. These reflections from international scholars, drawing upon historical, theoretical and empirical perspectives, provide insights into the development of religious education in a range of national contexts, from Europe to Canada and South Africa, as well as illuminating possible future directions for the subject.

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# Religious Education and Freedom of Religion and Belief

# Religion, Education and Values

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## Foreword

The International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV, <http://www.isrev.org>) is the most important international association in the field of Religious Education. It is an association of 233 Religious Education scholars from 36 countries. A major seminar session is organized in a different country every two years, with the seventeenth having taken place in Canada in 2010. ISREV was founded in 1978 by John M. Hull, the distinguished Australian academic (currently Honorary Professor of Practical Theology at The Queen's Foundation, and Emeritus Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham), and John H. Peatling, then of the Character Research Project in Union College, Schenectady, New York. The first meeting had research papers from thirty-two scholars attending from ten countries. The seventeenth meeting, in Ottawa, Canada, had research papers from 110 scholars attending from over thirty countries. ISREV has no religious basis or test itself, and has members specializing, for example, in Protestant and Catholic Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and secular traditions. Educationists and policy makers from across the world are interested in the work of ISREV, with members of the government in host countries regularly attending the seminars. In this time of conflict over religion in almost every country of the world, dialogue is needed more than ever.

Each seminar has a broad theme, and the theme for the Ottawa meeting was Religious Education and freedom of religion and belief. That theme is a clear marker of the deliberate attempt of researchers to influence policy makers, professional practitioners, and learners around the world. This book is one of the results of the seminar, a selection of roughly one in ten of the papers presented – a powerful argument for the contribution of Religious Education to freedom in the modern world. Religion is continuing to find its place in a more open and more diverse society, and Religious Education can help people not only understand religions but also understand how

they can work together in a more free political system. The diversity in society is not only a religious diversity, but also a diversity that includes secular humanism and other ‘worldviews’ or ‘stances for living’ – that is, other ways of being and becoming outside religions or religious traditions. Freedom of religion and belief means little if the societies claiming such freedom create a pretence of a wholly neutral or independent space from which people can ‘peer over the wall’ at religious or other ways of being. Ecological campaigners say ‘Don’t throw anything away: there is no place called “away”’. With respect to both religion and education, there is, similarly, no place called ‘neutral’. Everywhere is somewhere, and chapters in this book investigate the history of the development of Religious Education, in particular countries such as England, Canada, South Africa, and Latvia. This is one of the many joys of ISREV. Researchers from around the world come together with their own understandings and their own contexts in order to listen to and talk with people with other understandings and from other contexts.

The philosopher Martin Buber wrote that dialogue is important, not because we should give up our own positions, but because we should make the imaginative leap to the reality of the other person. As Buber’s colleague and biographer said of him, ‘the I-Thou relationship [initially described in Buber’s *I and Thou*] “teaches us to meet others and to hold our ground when we meet them”, ... [which] goes hand in hand with remaining on one’s own side of the relationship’ (Maurice Friedman in the introduction to Buber, 2002: xiii–xiv; see also Friedman, 1999). A number of the chapters in this book refer to dialogue in Religious Education classrooms, as well as political and academic dialogue. None of this is – or should be – the timid dialogue of pretended neutrality or weak compromise, but the robust dialogue amongst people who have and may retain fundamental differences.

I am delighted, as General Secretary of ISREV, to commend this book to its readers. It is itself a contribution to dialogue amongst researchers and all interested in Religious Education, and an example of dialogue amongst the authors themselves. ISREV lives by the vigour of its dialogue, and if this in turn contributes to freedom of religion and belief,

then the value of the research completed by its members, the seminar in Ottawa, and the exemplary material in this volume, will be all the more valuable.

Julian Stern  
General Secretary of ISREV

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STEPHEN PARKER, ROB FREATHY AND LESLIE J. FRANCIS

## Introduction

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (General Assembly of the United Nations, 1948) asserts that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right included freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

This clear statement of the basic human right for freedom of religion and belief provides huge opportunities and significant challenges for Religious Education and for religious educators across the globe. It was discussion of these opportunities and challenges that inspired the seventeenth session of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV), convened at St Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, during July 2010. This volume on *Religious Education and Freedom of Religion and Belief* draws together some of the key work stimulated and nurtured by that meeting of the seminar.

The International Seminar on Religious Education and Values was formed in Birmingham University, England, in 1978 and has continued to meet every other year across Europe and North America. The Seminar now draws together over 223 leading researchers in Religious Education from 36 countries, embracing a variety of religious and secular traditions concerned with many different aspects of Religious Education relevant both to secular schools and to faith communities. Such informed diversity brought a rich range of perspectives to the theme of Religious Education and freedom of religion and belief. In the present volume this diversity is reflected by organizing key contributions within three categories: historical perspectives, theoretical perspectives, and empirical perspectives.

The first section on historical perspectives draws together four detailed and informed discussions of developments in England, Canada, Latvia and Australia. From England, Rob Freathy and Stephen Parker draw on a wide range of previously neglected or unutilized primary documentary sources to illustrate a covert agenda underpinning the significant transitions which took place in Religious Education theory and policy in the late 1960s and 1970s. From Canada, Lorna M. A. Bowman draws on primary and secondary sources to provide an overview of the development of publicly-funded religious schools across Canada and the social and political forces at work, with particular attention to Newfoundland, Ontario and Quebec. From Latvia, Dzintra Iliško charts the transition of Latvian society from a monolithic soviet worldview to a state of religious diversity, and the impact of this transition on Religious Education in schools since 1991. From Australia, Peta Goldburg analyses the continuing significance of the series of Education Acts passed by various Australian States in the late 1800s for current opportunities and challenges facing Religious Education within the nation as a whole. Together, these four chapters provide a powerful reminder of how current connections between Religious Education and freedom of religion and belief are both facilitated and constrained by historical contexts.

The second section on theoretical perspectives draws together six discussions articulated by religious educators from England, South Africa, Canada, Sweden and Germany. From England, Jeff Astley distinguishes a freedom *for* religious belief from a deeper freedom *of* belief in the sense of an 'inner freedom' of human beings to control their religious state of mind, heart and spirit. Also from England, Brian Gates explores the concept of 'conscience' in connection with the personally-centred process of making moral sense within both religious and secular traditions. From South Africa, Petro du Preez presses the case that not just Religious Education but also the whole curriculum should be profoundly moral, human-rights orientated and should create enabling spaces for human beings to express their freedom of religion(s) and belief(s). From Canada, Mario O. D'Souza enquires into the possibility, place and implications of first principles in the context of religious and cultural pluralism. He argues that, although the freedom of religion and belief rise above the terrestrial limits of political society, they



are neither independent of such society, nor are the dispositions and convictions of one's religion and belief unrelated to the terrestrial pursuit of the common good. From Sweden, Karin Nordström discusses the paradox of education for freedom when educational interventions themselves restrict freedom. From Germany, Manfred L. Pirner discusses whether religious schools are able to promote the human right of freedom of religion and belief, and contribute to the common good in pluralist societies. Together these six chapters provide a powerful reminder of the complexity of the issues raised by the interface between human rights and issues concerning freedom of religion and belief. Clear thinking and clarity of expression are crucial for the proper engagement of Religious Education in this field.

The third section on empirical perspectives draws together three discussions from South Africa, England, and Australia. From South Africa, René Ferguson investigates how participation by teachers in a learning community, a community of practice, contributes toward improving their professional knowledge base for Religious Education as a focus area for Citizenship Education. From England, Kevin O'Grady also discusses the contribution to research made by a community of practice. He illustrates this contribution by focusing on the experience of secondary-age Religious Education pupils and how they might exercise freedom of belief during lessons. From Australia, Jan Grajczonek reports on part of a qualitative study conducted in the early years within a Catholic primary school. Using Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis, she identifies how teachers were construing young children as all belonging to, and sharing, the same religious beliefs. Together these three chapters provide a powerful reminder of how the debate regarding the connection between Religious Education, human rights, and freedom of religion and belief need to be informed not only by historical and theoretical perspectives, but also by giving close attention to the empirical reality as experienced by schools and expressed by pupils.



PART I

Historical Perspectives



# I Freedom from Religious Beliefs: Humanists and Religious Education in England in the 1960s and 1970s

## Abstract

On the basis of an analysis of a wide range of previously neglected or unutilized primary documentary sources, this chapter argues that the significant transitions which took place in Religious Education theory and policy in England in the late 1960s and early 1970s were, at least in part, catalyzed by a concerted and organized campaign by the British Humanist Association with the intention of either abolishing Religious Education, establishing a secular alternative (such as moral education) or secularizing the subject's aims and broadening its content to include world religions and secular worldviews. Notable Humanists, such as Harold Blackham, and many liberal Christians and Religious Education academics and professionals, sought together to develop educationally valid and multi-faith forms of 'open' Religious Education and moral education which would be suitable for all pupils and teachers regardless of their religious or secular backgrounds. These arguments are exemplified through a case study of the *Birmingham Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction* published in 1975. This was influenced by the then Chairman of the British Humanist Association, Harry Stopes-Roe, and generated much controversy, primarily for its inclusion of secular 'stances for living', of which Communism was the most contentious. The contribution of Humanists to the secularization, or at least extensive liberalization, of the aims of Religious Education has been severely underplayed in the existing historiography.

## Introduction

In an article in the *British Journal of Religious Education*, we promoted rigorous historical studies that are grounded in the appropriate historiography, utilize a wide range of original documentary and non-documentary primary sources and contextualize Religious Education in its wider political, social and cultural milieu (Freathy & Parker, 2010). We also advocated using such a methodology to explore the contemporary debate concerning the significant transition which took place in the nature and purpose of Religious Education in England in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For some, this has been characterized as a shift from child-centred, neo-confessional, Christian instruction to phenomenological, *non-confessional*, multi-faith Religious Education (Parsons, 1994: 173–174), whilst for others it represents a shift to a new moderate, liberal, ecumenical and in certain respects secular confessionalism (Barnes & Wright, 2006: 65–66). In our current research, we are focusing particularly upon the *Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Instruction* published in 1975 (City of Birmingham Education Committee, 1975a).

In England, since the 1944 Education Act, it has been a statutory requirement to provide weekly Religious Instruction (RI) (or Religious Education as it came to be known) and daily Collective Worship in every state-maintained school to all pupils, except those wholly or partly withdrawn by their parents. In fully state-maintained schools, as opposed to those partially funded by faith communities, Religious Education has been defined by Agreed Syllabuses drawn up by local conferences that consist of four committees representing the Anglican Church of England, other denominations, teacher associations and the Local Education Authority (LEA). In contrast to the dominant tradition up until that point, the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (BAS) sought to provide an ‘educational’ rationale for Religious Education directed ‘towards developing a critical understanding of the religious and moral dimensions of human experience and away from attempting to foster the claims of particular religious standpoints’ (City of Birmingham Education Committee, 1975a: 4).

Furthermore, it provided a multi-faith approach from the first year of primary school, which covered six world religions and required pupils to compare and contrast religious and non-religious ‘stances for living’. While Humanism was specifically mentioned in the statutory syllabus, Communism was specified as an alternative in the accompanying non-statutory handbook for teachers (City of Birmingham Education Committee, 1975b). Overall, the BAS included requirements for a form of Religious Education that has been referred to as a ‘major breakthrough’ (Hull, 1984: 29) and as ‘the total revolution of subject matter’ (Priestley, 2006: 1012).

The existing historiography has contextualized curriculum change in Religious Education in English schools in the 1960s and 1970s with regard to many factors, but too frequently the BAS has been described simply as a product of a particular theological outlook (e.g. Ninian Smart’s phenomenological approach to the study of religion combined with John Hick’s pluralist theology) or merely as a de-contextualized staging-post in the development of Agreed Syllabuses and/or Religious Education pedagogical theory. To address this, and other historiographical deficiencies, we have sought to provide a detailed case study of the formation and implementation of the BAS – and wider developments and changes in Religious Education – within a broader historical context and with recourse to relevant secondary sources, published and unpublished documentary primary sources and life history interviews (see Parker & Freathy, 2011a, 2011b). This chapter deals with one particularly noticeable feature of the evidence so far, namely, the influence of Humanist individuals, such as Harry Stopes-Roe and Harold J. Blackham, and organizations, such as the British Humanist Association, upon Religious Education theories and policies.

## The Birmingham Agreed Syllabus in public and political discourse

Once the drafting of the new BAS had commenced, Harry Stopes-Roe (1924–) (Senior Lecturer in Science Studies in the Extra Mural Department, University of Birmingham) became highly influential in promoting the inclusion of Humanism in the syllabus and monitoring the extent to which it endorsed faith-nurturing aims. Stopes-Roe was Chairman of the British Humanist Association (BHA) and a co-opted member of two of the syllabus' working parties. His co-option was largely due to considerable and persistent lobbying by local Humanists as well as his friendship with John Hick (then H. G. Wood Professor of Theology, University of Birmingham) who was Chairman of the syllabus's Co-ordinating Working Party. It was Stopes-Roe who coined 'stances for living' as an inclusive term used in the syllabus to describe both secular and religious ways of life.

The original version of the BAS was completed in Autumn 1973, but there were objections to its inclusion of non-religious 'stances for living' and questions were raised about whether the single-page syllabus fulfilled the legal requirements of the 1944 Education Act. This protestation helped to generate the publicity which ensured that the BAS brought significant new trends in Religious Education in England 'vividly before the general public for the first time' (Hull, 1984: 29, 83, 85). In the context of a level of paranoia about the influence of political extremism – especially Communism – upon British society in the 1970s, a lengthy correspondence was published in both *The Birmingham Post* and the *Birmingham Evening Mail* about the inclusion of Communism within the curriculum documentation with headlines such as 'Subversion', 'Communist textbook', 'The teaching of communism' and 'Happy Marx' (Copley, 2008: 107). Furthermore, in response to attempts to bring about 'a fundamental public debate on the role of Religious Education', local comparisons were drawn 'with Tennessee's celebrated "monkey trial" in 1925' in which John Scopes, a County High School teacher, was tried for teaching the theory of evolution in violation of a recently passed state law (Ezard, 1974).



On 10 February 1974, *The Observer* – a national newspaper – published an article on its front page titled ‘Reds-under-the-crib row’ in which Neil Scrimshaw, the Conservative Party spokesperson for education on Birmingham City Council, described the syllabus as ‘a complete manual on how to teach Communism under the guise of Religious Education’. A year later, in an article in *The Guardian* (Scrimshaw, 1975), Scrimshaw continued, ‘We object first and foremost in principle to an irreligion or an anti-religion being presented together with religious faiths. ... It is opening the floodgates to a study of communism in a religious atmosphere. We regard it as a licence both to preach and to teach Communism.’ As the controversy continued, there was a debate about the BAS in the House of Lords on 26 March 1975 (Hansard, Vol. 358, Cols. 1171–1175), which gained coverage in *The Times* under the headline ‘Communism in Religious Education’ (27 March 1975). The debate was opened by Lord Gisborough who asked the Labour Government, first, whether it approved ‘of the decision of Birmingham Education Committee that the teaching of Communism should be included in their new religious education syllabus’, and second, whether Lord Crowther-Hunt, as Minister of State for Education (1974–1976), ‘[w]ould agree that Communism has nothing to do with religion, or, if it has, then so has the teaching of the philosophies of Conservatism, Fascism and Socialism’ and ‘that the teachers’ handbook, while containing 150 favourable references, does not mention Labour camps, the KGB and the like’ (Cols. 1171–1172). In response, Lord Crowther-Hunt declared that the government ‘does not exercise powers over what is taught in the schools’ and that ‘we do not want to reach a position in which the Secretary of State in any Government, can actually dictate what is taught in the schools’ (Col. 1174). All bar one of the other explicit references to the BAS in parliamentary discussions in the 1970s criticized its inclusion of secular ‘stances for living’, particularly Communism.

Subsequent legal advice recommended extending and clarifying the aims and content of the syllabus, particularly to ensure that non-religious subject matter was used to advance instruction in religion rather than taught for its own sake (Stopes-Roe, 1976: 134; Hull, 1984: 85). In response, a letter in *The Times* from representatives of the BHA, including Harold Blackham, Francis Crick, Hans Eysenck and Harold Pinter, stated, ‘If the

courts uphold these opinions – or if Birmingham implicitly accepts them by rejecting the syllabus – the case for reform of the religious provisions of the 1944 Education Act will surely be irresistible. Not only the Humanists and religious minorities, who have long denounced it as discriminatory, but many mainstream Christians and the vast majority of teachers and educationists will find this legal barrier to continued development of the subject intolerable’ (‘Religious education’, 28 June 1974). Contrary to their wishes, a revised version of the syllabus was published in May 1975, but the debates continued, for example, at a designated conference at Manchester College, Oxford in March 1976 and in a Special Feature on ‘The Birmingham Syllabus & Handbook 1975’ in *Learning for Living* (15[4], 1976).

In the *Learning for Living* Special Issue, Stopes-Roe criticized the revisions that were made between the 1973 and 1975 versions of the BAS. He argued that the original syllabus had been fair and balanced with respect to religious and non-religious ‘stances for living’, but that the final version was ‘dominated by religion’ (1976: 133). This was evident in regard to two elements: first, ‘the material as a whole is slanted in a religious direction’, and second, ‘particularly for the younger ages, fundamental emotional forces [e.g. wonder, mystery and love] are taken over by religion’ (Stopes-Roe, 1976: 135). It was also evident in the contrasting statements regarding the purposes of Religious Education in the 1973 and 1975 versions of the syllabus. The original version stated (Stopes-Roe, 1976: 134) (our italics added):

The purpose of ‘religious education’ is not only to enlarge and deepen the understanding of the different *stances for living* to which different people are committed but also in some cases to stimulate within the pupils a personal search for meaning and in others to illuminate a sense of meaning which they already have.

By contrast, the final version stated that the purpose is (our italics added):

to enlarge and deepen the pupils’ understanding of *religion* by studying world religions, and by exploring all those elements in human experience which raise questions about life’s ultimate meaning and value. This involves informing pupils in a

descriptive, critical and experiential manner about what *religion* is, and increasing their sensitivity to the areas of experience from which a *religious* view of life may arise. It should stimulate within the pupils, and assist them in the search for, a personal sense of meaning in life, whilst enabling them to understand the beliefs and commitments of others.

Stopes-Roe (1976: 135) argued that the realization of the aim to increase pupils' 'sensitivity to the areas of experience from which a religious view of life may arise' would establish 'religious indoctrination'. His charges were refuted, rather unconvincingly, by John Hick (1976) and John Hull (1976b). The primary issue at stake was whether Religious Education could justifiably prioritize religious aims, methods and/or content and, if not, whether it could continue as a 'compulsory' curriculum subject in its current form.

Stopes-Roe's criticisms of the partiality of the final version of the syllabus were also evident in the BHA's pamphlet *Objective, Fair and Balanced: A New Law for Religion in Education* which was co-authored by Stopes-Roe and published in October 1975. On the assumption that it is improper for fully state-maintained schools in a religiously plural society to bias children for or against religion (British Humanist Association, 1975: 35), the BHA advocated repealing and amending the religious clauses in the 1944 Education Act so as to replace Religious Education with 'Education in Stances for Living'. This new curriculum subject would provide pupils with an opportunity to be educated together in an objective, fair and balanced manner about the religious and non-religious outlooks and systems of belief upon which people build their lives (British Humanist Association, 1975: 32). To facilitate this, the pamphlet presented 'a draft Bill' (British Humanist Association, 1975: 1) ready to be introduced in the next Session of Parliament as a Private Members Bill by Mr Geoffrey Edge (Labour Member of Parliament). In fact, Edge got no further than submitting a written question – answered negatively – to the Secretary of State for Education and Science to ask whether he would remove the compulsory act of Collective Worship in fully state-maintained schools and replace compulsory Religious Instruction with optional teaching of comparative religious and non-religious studies for life (Hansard, House of Commons,

7 November 1975, Vol. 899, Col. 328). It was the third such question to have been asked in the House of Commons that year about the statutory requirements for Religious Education in the 1944 Education Act (4 February and 6 May 1975). At the time, Hull (1976a: 123) argued that the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act were not under serious political threat, but the possibility of abolition was palpable enough to persuade Raymond Johnstone (Director of the Nationwide Festival of Light movement), the Marchioness of Lothian (Chair of the Order of Christian Unity), Charles Oxley (Headmaster of Scarisbrick Hall School) and Mary Whitehouse (Honorary General Secretary of the National Viewers and Listeners Association) to launch the 'Save Religion in State Schools' campaign on 27 January 1976.

The above account provides evidence that individual Humanists, such as Harry Stopes-Roe, and the BHA more generally, sought to influence the development of, and subsequent discourse about, the BAS of 1975. However, our in-depth study of primary sources shows that the influence of the BHA was felt in Birmingham at least as early as 1967 when work on the BAS had not even begun. The Reverend D. J. W. Bradley (a senior Anglican cleric, member of the LEA's Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education and Diocesan Director of Education) opined that it is 'no longer possible automatically to claim for Christianity an exclusively privileged status in public education without an affront to the liberty of the citizen'. Moreover, perceiving the reconsideration of the aims of Religious Education as an opportunity rather than a threat, he continued, 'we Christians need not despair ... We readily recognize that a more "open" approach to both religious education and the daily act of collective worship ... is now dictated by progressive thought outside and inside the Churches' (*The Birmingham Post*, 24 October 1967). In this regard, Bradley referred explicitly to the BHA's *Religion in Schools: Humanist Proposals for State-Aided Schools in England and Wales* (1967) (see below) and the organization's ongoing campaign to reform or repeal the religious clauses of the 1944 Education Act.

## Harold Blackham and the BHA

The BHA had its roots in the Union of Ethical Societies which was founded in 1895 by the American Stanton Coit (1857–1944) (Royle, 1994: 419). Ethicists envisaged ‘a universal and synoptic morality which would unite individuals of different creeds’ (Wright, 2008: 811). One of their initiatives was the formation of the Moral Instruction League in England in 1897 to promote systematic and secular moral instruction based on social or civic morality rather than duty to God. After the First World War, the League was abolished and the Union of Ethical Societies fell into decline, that is, until 1963 when the BHA was founded through an alliance of the Union of Ethical Societies and the Rationalist Press Association (est. 1899). (The second organization withdrew after legal problems in 1967.) The inaugural meeting of the BHA was held in the House of Commons with A. J. Ayer (Wykeham Professor of Logic, University of Oxford and President of the BHA, 1965–1970) among those present. From its inception, the BHA began campaigning for the elimination of world poverty, the repeal of Sunday Observance Laws, freedom of speech, the removal of privileges given to religious groups, and the reform of the 1944 Education Act.

The BHA’s first Executive Director (1963–1968) was Harold J. Blackham (1903–2009). Blackham’s family background was in Congregationalism. Both his father and grandfather had been Congregationalist preachers (Copson, 2009, January 27). He had studied English and Ethics at Birmingham University, before spending two years teaching Divinity, History and English at Doncaster Grammar School (‘Obituary’, 2009b). There, he felt impelled to extend the boundaries of the Divinity syllabus ‘to deal with the difficult questions he was wrestling with himself’ (Smoker, 2009). Then, having taken up work as a freelance lecturer and writer, he underwent an intellectual crisis in which he rejected ‘all forms of supernatural religion’, whilst retaining ‘an intensely moral view of the world’, and exhibiting a determination to work ‘ecumenically and equally with religious and non-religious individuals and organizations on the basis of the common values of all people of good will’ (‘Obituary’, 2009b). In 1935, Blackham