Setting Patterns: The Atypical Choices
That Shaped the Career of Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet
in Twentieth-Century Australia*

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Introduction

Changing Patterns: An Atypical Autobiography is the title that the Australian biologist Sir Frank Macfarlane Burnet (1899-1985) gave to the memoirs that he published (Burnet, 1968) upon his retirement from a long and fruitful career at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute for Medical Research (WEHI) in Melbourne, Australia. As Burnet explained, he had characterized his autobiography atypical “because I should like to see it be something more than an account of my own experiences and ideas and at the same time, much less than a comprehensive autobiography.”1 While it is not an unusual practice for scientists to include scientific details in their autobiographies these details are almost always presented against the wider landscape of the authors’ life. Burnet’s personal life, however, was almost entirely missing from Changing Patterns, which gave his claim of atypicality considerable weight. Indeed, as one reviewer remarked, “the one most

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personal chapter of the book […] is the least interesting in the book which is otherwise highly successful.”

The reason for invoking Burnet’s memoirs at the outset of this essay is to provide the context for the title which replaces the “changing” of the original with “setting.” The “change” in the original title refers to the author’s angle on “the way in which scientific aspects of medicine [had] changed [and] how new concepts of human biology emerged” in relation to his own scientific activities. By writing his memoirs, Burnet was in many ways following a path of atypicality that he had begun to tread from the very outset of his career by making choices that were unusual for Australians of his generation. As a result of these choices he both seeded the patterns of his own career and set a pattern that many other Australians began to follow. These actions were instrumental in forging an independent scientific identity for their newly-formed nation, which had only achieved the status of a federation in 1901. In this paper I examine Burnet’s career against the backdrop of the changing landscape of the Australian biomedical sciences during the twentieth century and give voice to various factors that played a role in its shaping.

Science Down Under

The quality and abundance of its world-class scientists and research institutions bears testimony to Australia’s standing in the international biomedical research scene today. But this prominence was a relatively late development in its history and one that only really gained momentum after Word War II. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Australia presented quite a different face to the scientific world. A young nation, only newly independent, it still relied heavily on its ties to Great Britain. Except for a political right to self government, it remained in many respects still a part of the British Empire and subservient to it in all matters of defense and foreign policy for some years. Even after it broke away from these political ties, in other spheres such as science and technology, this dependency on Great Britain, both as an intellectual resource and for institutional support, continued for some decades to come. As late as 1939, “Australian scientists tended to see themselves and their work very much within the context of a larger British scientific network.”

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3 Burnet, Changing Patterns, p.1.