



Turbulent teacher

Brilliant but a maverick, Ted Steele is fighting a lengthy feud with the university that sacked him. The saga raises the question: is there room in academe for free-thinkers?

ON February 26, 2001, the image-conscious University of Wollongong, finding itself at the centre of a national uproar over "soft marking" claims, summarily dismissed its volcanic and highly inconvenient chief whistleblower Ted Steele, a free-thinker and revolutionary in microbiology — indeed, one of the only Australian life scientists with an outside prospect of winning a Nobel Prize for his ideas.

The resultant year-long battle, which comes to its climax in a court hearing next month, has rocked the placid, enclosed world of the Illawarra Valley, unspooling like some particularly violent prime-time TV soap opera, filling local newspaper headlines, dividing the already factionalised academic community, provoking frowns of worry among the grandees of the professional establishment.

The Steele saga, though, cuts far wider and raises disquieting questions. Who guards the standards of mass university education in Australia? Is there, for all our fixation on the ideal of a Knowledge Nation, any serious national tradition of excellence? And what, off the sports field where all is permitted, do we really think of that ultimate species of tall poppy: the raw, undisciplined genius?

Of course, to those it has engulfed, the ultra-baroque Steele case seems to be about other things. For Steele, it is about livelihood, career, ambition and academic standards at his provincial university. For the education union, which is grimly backing Steele's campaign for reinstatement to his post, and the 4500 academics around the country who signed their petition, it is about freedom of speech and the right of every lecturer and tenured professor to enjoy due process.

And for Wollongong University's vice-chancellor Gerard Sutton who has been locked in a savage duel with his most turbulent academic star for many years,

it is about maintaining the battered reputation of his bijou south coast fiefdom.

Ted Steele is one of life's upsetters. Born (nice irony) in Darwin, full of talent, he shone as a graduate in microbiology. Very early, researching in Canada, he made a big break: He found suggestive signs that lab mice could pass on to their offspring acquired immune resistance. This was a violation of the basic principle underlying modern Darwinian theory: the notion of random mutation driving natural selection.

Steele at once became the wild colonial boy of science and a lightning conductor for international controversy. He had a brief, rough spell in the limelight in London before regrouping in Australia. He secured a post at Wollongong and rose fast.

With him, notoriety came to the campus. He fought a campaign for Vietnam veterans who claimed Agent Orange had caused birth defects in their children. He struggled to win attention for his evolving theory. He won the backing of a senior microbiologist, Bob Blanden of the John Curtin School at the Australian National University and he fought off overseas attempts to plagiarise his ideas.

Eventually, he published a well-received book; the background climate of world science began to shift in favour of his ideas. In July 2000, he received a landmark accolade, he was asked to present an overview of his ideas to London's Royal Society.

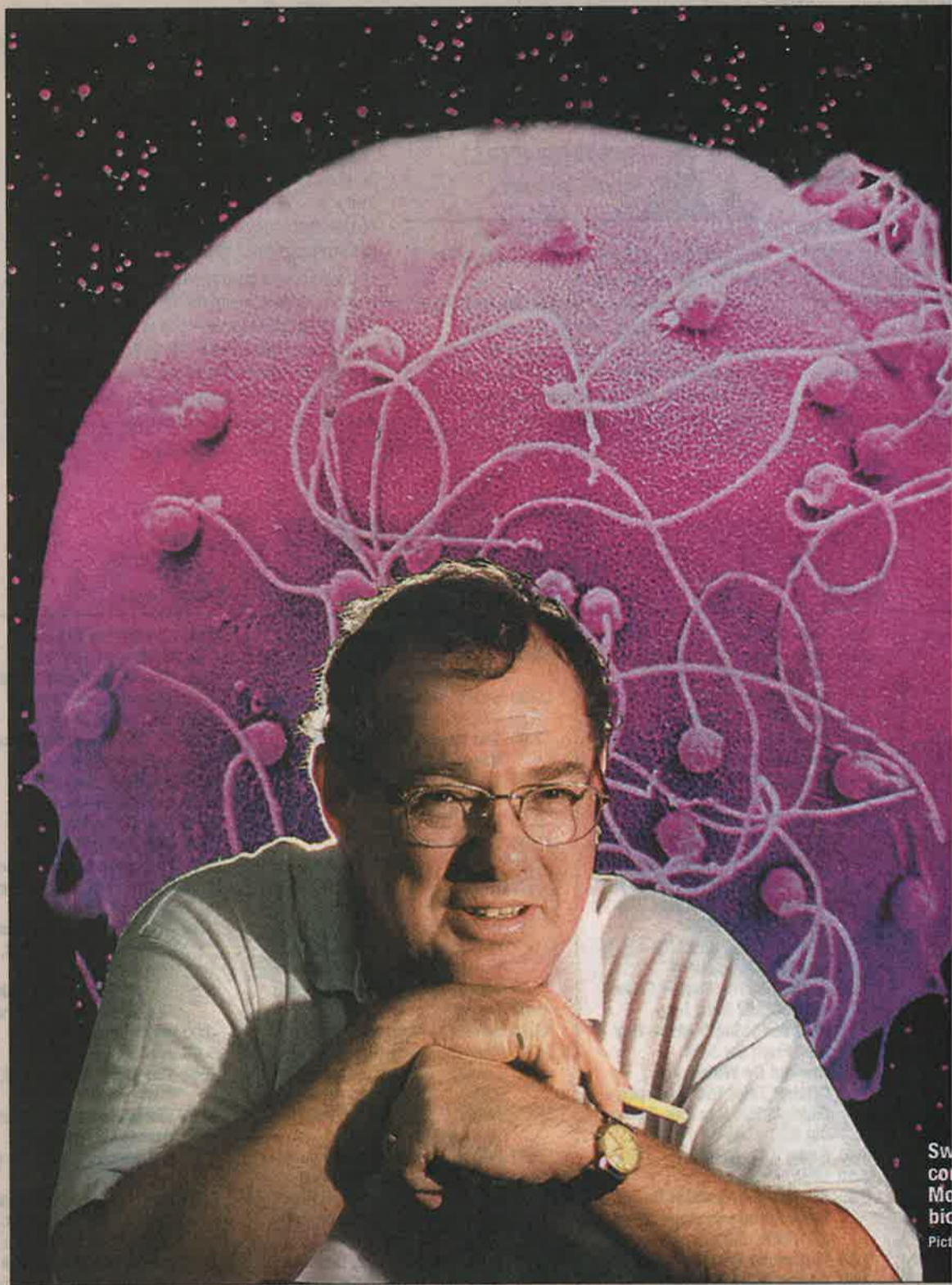
It was strong meat, for Steele now holds that genetic information can be transferred from cells in the body's immune system to "germ-line cells" that are passed on to offspring. He has a model for the process. While it does not overturn Darwinian evolutionary dogma, it modifies it and makes the resultant world picture much more messy and complicated.

Steele, in fact, is the latest in the long line of bold, unconventional Australian microbiologists and medical researchers, a tradition that begins with Howard

contentions



Nicolas Rothwell



Ted Steele: A life of trials

October 27, 1948: Born in Darwin.

1967-70: Educated at University of Adelaide.

1976: PhD on immunity to cholera.

1979: Publishes first version of his theory while at Ontario Cancer Institute in Canada; invited to London's Wellcome Trust; controversy swirls about his ideas. Encouraged by Hungarian writer on evolution, Arthur Koestler. Anti-Steele

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who has similar ideas about inheritance of acquired traits. Made associate professor at Wollongong. Feuds with *Nature* editor John Maddocks. Introduces selected writings of E. L. Grant Watson, a key intellectual precursor. **1990-91:** Campaigns to save independence of Canberra's John Curtin School of Medical Research.

1996: Fights without success to preserve physics

department **1998:** Signs key international published. **2000:** Appeals Society, London concern over standards at **2001:** Fired post. Union reinstates him rules in Steele University at **February 27:** decision due

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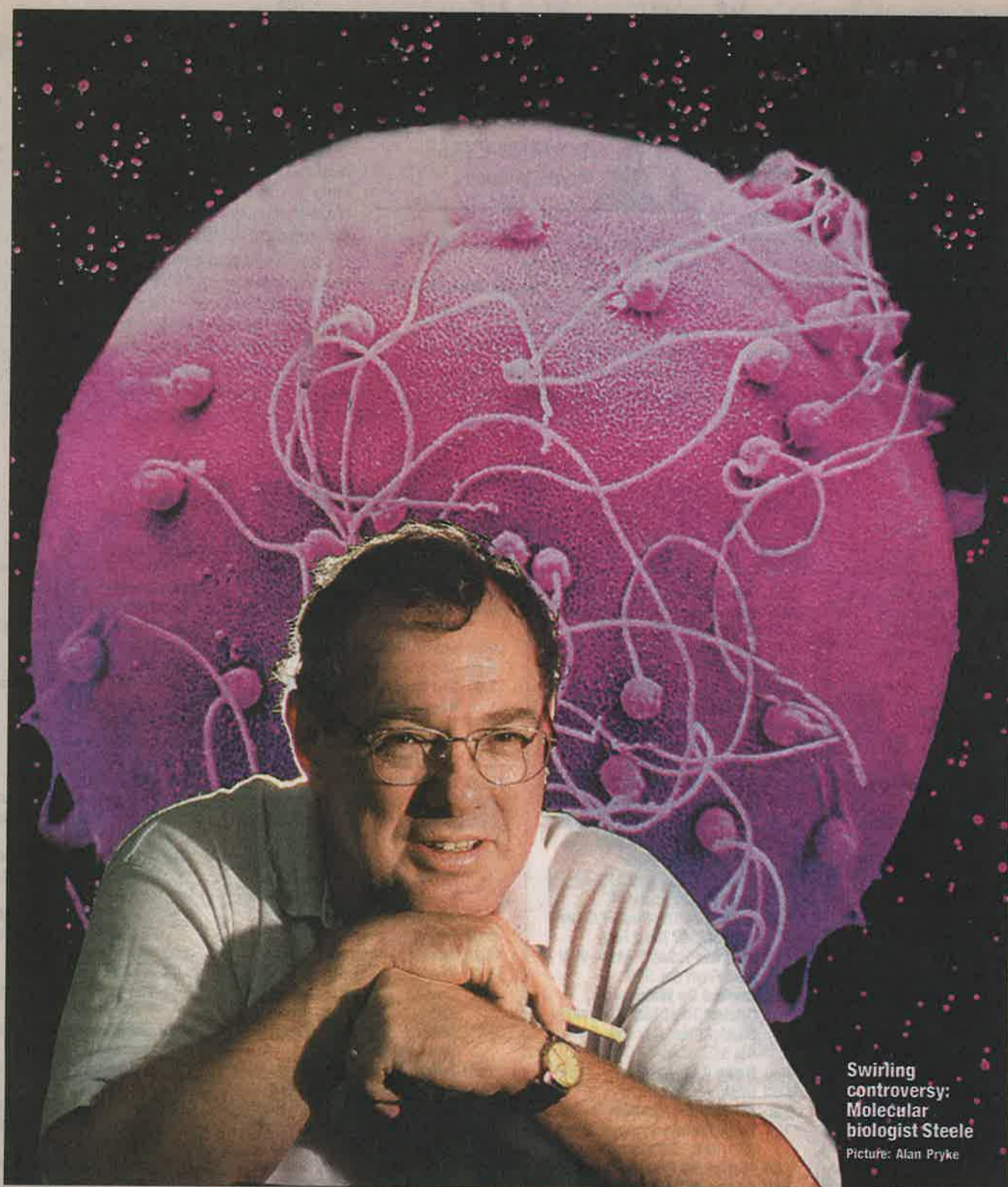
It would be easy, in the context of this overview, to make mock of a university that has failed to keep such an errant star within its fold. Indeed, the University of Wollongong is a soft target: it proclaims itself the "University of the Year", a title described by *Quadrant* editor Paddy McGuinness as a "national joke". Its hapless vice-chancellor tells the people

of Wollongong the model for its future as a non-metropolitan powerhouse is none other than Stanford in California; its busy website, where Steele's name does not figure, boasts eagerly of its research venture with Marks and Spencer to create a "smart bra".

To mock, though, would be to misunderstand. By seeking corporate partners and relentlessly boosting its credentials as a place where students can equip themselves to make more money, the little campus on Northfields Avenue is doing exactly what it is supposed to do. As a second-tier institution in the brave new

realm of Australian looking for funds, civic pride, helping develop and it is no such as Steele four uncongenial.

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Swirling controversy: Molecular biologist Steele
Picture: Alan Pryke

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controversy, broadening his canvas, he flatly identified a national pattern of declining standards in the sciences.

Steele's bleak view of Australian academe finds broad echoes among his scientific colleagues, though not among university administrators. It seems the managerial culture on campus has long since turned away from his style of blue-sky research.

John Schuster, head of the department of history and philosophy of science at the University of NSW, and, by one of life's little quirks, the victim of a long-term feud at the University of Wollongong, believes that Steele's scientific importance, while increasingly recognised overseas, is not vastly attractive to Australian universities.

"Steele's research is quite possibly a very significant addition to the genetic picture. If it is borne out, and neatly ascribed to him and his team, they'd get the prize," says Schuster.

"That kind of research has its own value, in 10, 20, 30 years down the track but the problem is that public servants and politicians don't think of universities as places with long-term potential.

"The increasing success of his theory led me to think anyone halfway alert in Australia would take the hint. None of this had any importance, though, his own university turned around and fired the guy."

Bob Blanden, Steele's chief scientific partner — indeed mentor — and former head of immunology at the John Curtin School, regards his friend's plight as part of a wider problem: the onrush of campus commercialisation.

"The almighty buck is dominating all our lives and every serious academic knows and regrets it," Blanden says. "Since the Dawkins revolution of the late '80s, university administrators have metamorphosed into pragmatists with economic rationalist presumptions, worried about spin doctoring and money.

"This has affected what scientists say and do. People are always ready to talk about cancer cures and AIDS vaccines, there's a continuous spin-doctored stream of nonsense coming out of our universities.

"These kinds of people rise to the top: many have no ability or wish to understand what Ted Steele and his work is about."

What, above all, is he about? Frontier research, or defending academic standards, or pricking the pretensions of the campus authorities? All the above, of course. Radicals of his type simply can't prune their personalities. Universities were originally meant as places for his kind, brilliant individuals who would enjoy the freedom to think. Einsteins who protest against nuclear proliferation; Feynmans who discover the problems in space shuttle O-rings.

The Canberra scholar Simon Leys provided a famous definition in his essay, *Do We Need Universities?* "They should be 'places where scholars seek truth, pursue and transmit knowledge for knowledge's sake — irrespective of the consequences, implications and utility of the endeavour'."

Steele's dilemma illustrates the great paradox of Australian higher education: the more of it there is, the less there seems to be a national culture of excellence. Here is a tall poppy and rough diamond from central casting: Why not give him a prime ministerially funded research institute?

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department at Wollongong.
1998: Significant book and key international papers published.
2000: Appears at Royal Society, London. Voices concern over marking standards at Wollongong.
2001: Fired from tenured post. Union campaign to reinstate him. Federal Court rules in Steele's favour. University appeals decision.
February 27, 2002: Court decision due in Steele case.

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realm of Australian tertiary studies, it is looking for funds, generating a touch of civic pride, helping an industrial town develop and it is no surprise that a figure such as Steele found such boosterism uncongenial.

His agonies over what he perceived to be soft marking led him to ever more frenzied protests, which he conducted as a wildfire campaign over the university's email system — a cyber gulch of paranoia where gossip, faction and vituperation had long been rampant. Steele's concerns, though, stretched wider than mere marking. At a series of Senate hearings last year into the

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