

# Obituary

## **Meroula Frances Fellowes (Mollie) Lukis (1911–2009)**

Mollie Lukis, the foundation State Archivist of Western Australia, died in Perth on 1 August 2009. She was a little short of 98 years of age.

Mollie was born on 13 August 1911 at Donnybrook in Western Australia, and lived on a farm at Balingup. She was privately educated for the early part of her school years, but later attended St Mary's Church of England Girls' School in Perth. She studied for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Western Australia, and graduated with Honours in 1932, adding to this a Diploma of Education in 1933.

She undertook a teaching career in mathematics, and taught in Melbourne, at overseas locations and at St Hilda's Church of England Girls' School in Perth. During World War II, from 1941 to 1944, Mollie worked as a metrologist at the Defence Research Laboratory (later Defence Standards Laboratory) at Maribyrnong in Victoria.

Meanwhile, the Principal Librarian at the State Library of Western Australia Dr JS Battyé was furthering his long-held ambition to give life and purpose to the collection and organisation, arrangement and exploitation, of the Western Australian state archives. Battyé had received into his custody at the Public Library some of the records of the colonial and state government in 1903 (Colonial Secretary's Department) and 1918 (Treasury), and his own publications in the field of Western Australian history (*Cyclopaedia of Western Australia*, *History of the north-west of Australia*, and *Western Australia: a history from its discovery to the inauguration of the Commonwealth*) had also brought some valuable papers into the library's control. However, the state government's failure to supply him with specialised staff had made progress in developing the state archives very slow indeed. In 1944, the trustees of the library impressed upon the state government that there was a need to establish a state archives within the library; Battyé supported this move, which was being advocated by such groups within the community as the historical society. Battyé advertised the

post of Archivist and Mollie Lukis, who had no training as an archivist nor in Australian history, applied for the position and, perhaps to her own amazement, she was appointed. Mollie confessed later that when the job was advertised she did not know what an archivist was!

Mollie began her new duties in March 1945, working in a single room and with an operating budget of 250 pounds. She set about the task of gaining knowledge of the duties she was to perform. She visited the South Australian Archives – at that time the only government organisation in Australia describing itself as an archival institution. She read as widely as she could, Jenkinson and Miller, Feith and Fruin being the only archivists whose texts were available in English.

Mollie Lukis built up the West Australian Archives, established procedures and strategies which were vital for its success, gained publicity for the organisation that made it a world-class institution and a prime resource on Western Australian history. In 1954 Mollie attended TR Schellenberg's seminars in Canberra, but was summoned home when news of Dr Battye's death reached the national capital. The flurry of reorganisation that followed certainly gave the archives a new position. FA Sharr had arrived in Perth the previous year, and was the Secretary of the Library Board. In those early years, the board had no administrative connection with the Public Library. Changes to the board's legislation enabled it to take over the Public Library, and gave Sharr the opportunity to create a state reference library (which, at first, he called simply the State Library) and this would be an essential central resource for his network of public libraries, then beginning to take shape in various parts of Western Australia. Mollie Lukis was appointed as the head of the West Australian History division of the library, which was named after Dr Battye. The JS Battye Library would include the Western Australian State Archives.

Mollie was granted a Carnegie Corporation Travel Grant in 1957 for the study of archives and libraries in the United Kingdom and the United States. In Washington, she was able to renew her acquaintance with Schellenberg, who was delivering a course of lectures at the American University.

Mollie undertook the duties and responsibilities of an archivist in a broad sense. For instance, she was a strong supporter of the Royal

Western Australian Historical Society, and advised it on its own collecting policy, in a field which, of course, paralleled her own. She was a member of the society's council from 1953 to 1959, and was made a fellow of the society in 1971.

The *West Australian* in its obituary (5 August 2009) described Mollie as an archivist and an activist. Its readers may have been somewhat surprised at the use of the word 'activist' to describe such a gentle, civilised, and refined lady. The writer Kate Campbell was referring to Mollie's work for the recognition of women's equality to men. Her work in this area was demonstrated by active membership of the Western Australian Committee for Equal Opportunity from 1958 to 1973 culminating in the achievement of their purpose. She was a member of the Australian Federation of University Women (Western Australian branch) from 1947. The federation worked towards establishing a purpose-built university women's college, which came into being in 1960 as St Catherine's College. Mollie was a member of the college council from 1964 to 1982 and its chairman from 1979 to 1982. She was awarded the Fellowship of the College.

Mollie undertook field trips into distant parts of the vast state of Western Australia, locating and rescuing quantities of local records that had accumulated in towns and other locations especially in parts of the goldfields where so much early mining activity had taken place. Many of these locations were now neglected, and some of them were almost unoccupied. The rescue of this part of Western Australia's history was significant, and some archivists and research historians in other parts of Australia followed her example in salvaging their local records.

Mollie also played a major role in supporting the Western Australian Museum, most notably on the Maritime Archaeology Advisory Committee from 1965 to 1971, which for a time she chaired. This was a critical time, as the Dutch shipwrecks were being discovered along the Western Australian coast and Commonwealth and state legislation was being formulated to deal with the situation.

At the formation of the National Trust of Australia (Western Australia) in 1959, Mollie became a foundation member and during the ensuing years she gave this organisation unstinting and constructive service. She was elected to the first council of the trust and remained a member

until 1975: she was a member of the buildings committee (and its successors) from its inception. She was a long-time member of the publications committee, in which capacity she wrote extensively for the trust's publications and the historic book series. She was awarded honorary membership of the National Trust in 1994.

Mollie's service to libraries, as distinct from archive institutions, also deserves special mention. She was a member of the Library Board of Western Australia from its inauguration in 1952 until 1955, and again (following her retirement as State Archivist and head of the Battye Library) from 1974 to 1977. She was awarded the Fellowship of the Board in 1989. The Library Association of Australia recognised her special contribution to library and archives work by making her a Fellow of the Association in 1963.

Mollie was generous with her time, and staff members of the Battye Library especially appreciated the staff parties she hosted in her home. To the end of her life she encouraged the younger members of the staff, and proved herself to be a remarkable woman who made the community a better place for all of us.

Honours which she received included Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1976, Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2004, and a Honorary DLitt. from Murdoch University in 1985.

**Written by Bob Sharman based on his own notes and those compiled by Margaret Medcalf and M Lennie McCall**