

Obituary

Gerald Lyn Fischer (1923–2010)



Gerald Fischer
Courtesy of University of Sydney Archives

Gerald Fischer, former State Archivist of South Australia (1960–1968), University of Sydney Archivist (1969–1980), and second President of the Australian Society of Archivists (1977–79), passed away on Thursday 26 August 2010.

Gerald was born on 28 July 1923 at Aldgate, near Adelaide, South Australia, and was brought up there. His mother came from Saddleworth while his father (from Swiss–German roots) was an Aldgate baker and storekeeper, originally from Lyndoch in South Australia’s Barossa Valley, and was also President of the Aldgate Institute Library.¹

Gerald was educated locally, attending the Aldgate Primary School from 1929 to 1936, showing particular interest in history and literature. He also played tennis. His secondary education was obtained at Muirden College (1937–38) in the city of Adelaide with an emphasis on clerical skills. While there he became interested in architectural

drafting which he pursued independently of his college work. His main accomplishment was typewriting which was to be surprisingly important throughout his life. At the age of 15 he took a tedious job as a junior clerk on a wage of £1 a week in a wood veneer factory at Torrensville where he stayed for three years.²

As Gerald himself once remarked, '... and then a most extraordinary event happened - of course, the war broke out, and ... in fact, I wouldn't be sitting here with you tonight, I'm sure, if it had not been for the outbreak of the war.'³ Gerald was conscripted into the Army in 1942 at the age of 18. He served for five years in the infantry and an artillery regiment - in Queensland, Geelong, and the Northern Territory and even in Morotai in the Spice Islands (Moluccas) of the East Indies, before returning to Adelaide at the end of the war. He was discharged from the Army in 1946.

With the help of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, Gerald resumed his formal education, matriculated and then enrolled at the University of Adelaide in the years 1948-49 and undertook an 'ordinary B.A. degree ... with an emphasis on history',⁴ which he completed on a part-time basis in 1953, and was awarded his first degree in 1954.

Meanwhile, he had a public service interview at the end of 1949 that led him into archival work when in 1950 he was appointed Archives Assistant at the Public Library of South Australia, working with the then State Archivist George Pitt, and then Pitt's successor, John McLellan. During this 'apprenticeship' period he became qualified in librarianship and archives administration by completing the Registration Certificate awarded by the Library Association of Australia.⁵ Principal examiners in the archives papers were Phyllis Mander Jones and Alan Horton.

For a period in 1958, Gerald moved to Canberra where he lived at Lawley House and worked in the Australian Reference Section of the National Library of Australia. After six months he returned to the Public Library of South Australia. In 1959 he took charge of the Archives Department while McLellan was on long service leave, and then in 1961 he was appointed Senior Librarian Grade II in Charge

of the Archives Department (State Archivist), a position he held until October 1968. During this period (when the designation Archivist was no longer used by the State Public Service Board), the Archives Department perceived itself as adopting a 'portmanteau view' (an attitude and practice of collecting and holding the widest range of historical documentation relating to South Australia).⁶ '[I]n the 1960s general publicity of the Department took more account of the archives of business enterprise and of private societies of all kinds',⁷ notable amongst which were those of the publisher Rigby Ltd.

In his capacity as State Archivist, Gerald became involved with Douglas Pike and the development of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)*, and worked with many of the editors and advisors including Pike, Hancock, Moyal and Tregenza. He attended the launching of the *ADB* in Canberra in 1965.

At the instigation of the State Librarian, Gerald edited the first issue of *South Australiana: a journal for the publication and study of South Australian historical and literary manuscripts* in March 1962 and was responsible for its ongoing publication.⁸

In 1963, at the age of 40, Gerald experienced 'the best thing that has ever happened to me when she [Gwenda] agreed to marry me.'⁹ Gwenda, originally from Victoria, and at that time a law librarian at the University of Adelaide, introduced herself to Gerald in the University Staff Club in the interests of satisfying the supposed 'purpose of the dining room . . . for people to meet sociably . . .'¹⁰

Well known in the world of archives across the country, Gerald was influential in the evolution of policy and practice regarding the application of the 'record group system' to the arrangement and description of holdings of the South Australian Archives Department.¹¹ He was also influential in negotiating the optimal location of archives *vis a vis* libraries. He campaigned to raise the professional standing of archivists, to take them away from the notion that the management of archives was simply a specialised branch of library work, and this eventually triumphed in the return to a separate Archives Division in the restructuring of the Public Library of South Australia by 1960.¹²

On 8 June 1962, Gerald was invited, in a letter from Sir Grenfell Price, to be a member of a working party, in his capacity as 'Archivist of the Public Library of South Australia', to make recommendations to the National Library of Australia for the establishment of a guide to collections.¹³

He was the epitome of professionalism as an archivist, but it was his personal qualities that warmed him to all manner of people and made him remarkably well-connected. He was wonderfully polite and courteous, and readers visited the archives often mainly for a chat with Gerald. This was important for cultivating relations with donors of archives as well as the efficient operation of the archives in general. In addition to all this, Gerald was working towards the completion of his thesis for the Master Degree in History, which he achieved in 1968.¹⁴

In 1968 Gerald was appointed Archivist of the University of Sydney (Senior Lecturer level) where he reported to the Registrar. He promoted the archives with exhibitions and publications notable among which is the University of Sydney Archives' newsletter *Record*, which continues to this day. During his years with the university, Gerald was granted a three-month sabbatical when he travelled to Europe and investigated records management systems in the universities of London, Cambridge, Oxford, Grenoble (France), Nottingham, Edinburgh, Bonn (Germany) and Zurich (Switzerland), among others.¹⁵

From his introduction to archives work Gerald had been concerned with the development of the profession. This was evidenced by: his gaining archival qualifications through the Library Association of Australia; being an active member, and later twice president of the archives section of that same association; instigating the formation of the Sydney Archive Group in 1970; giving lectures in the first Australian postgraduate course in archives administration at the University of New South Wales from 1973; participating in the formation of the Australian Society of Archivists in 1973-75, and being a member of its first Council and then its second President; and, his legacy of published writings on archival developments in Australia.

On his retirement Gerald and Gwenda returned to South Australia, built a home in Lyndoch and after happy years there made their final home in Brighton. In these settings they pursued their bibliophilic

enthusiasms and Gerald continued the publication of many small works from his hand set private publishing house 'Pump Press', that he had maintained since 1956,¹⁶ publishing a regular *Historical Facts and Events Mainly South Australian*, from 1986 to 1996.

Gerald maintained an interest in archival developments in South Australia, and through his efforts the Friends of the Public Records of South Australia was established in October 1984 with the objective of encouraging 'the government to establish a legislatively based Public Record Office of South Australia.'¹⁷ This organisation lapsed about four years later when the government seemed to lose interest in archival legislation. Not to be daunted 'in April 1994 [Gerald] again outlined to the [ASA] Branch membership [his] ideas for some kind of friends-type group to monitor and assist South Australian Archival development . . .'¹⁸ The Friends of South Australia's Archives was established, as a result of Gerald's virtually single-handed efforts, at a public meeting on 28 February 1996. He became the inaugural Secretary and the second President. Subsequently the Friends organisation has done much to support the preservation of specific archives and to advocate for the users of archives in South Australia.

As one of his friends in later life remarked, 'Gerald Fischer was the best of company, full of verbal tricks and drollery. And he was always a master of self-deprecation. Looking back on his career in 1999 he concluded by saying in typical fashion: "Well there it is. It was all good fun and I think we did a useful job".'¹⁹

A secular funeral service was conducted at the graveside at Stirling District Cemetery, Strathalbyn Road, Aldgate at 1:00 pm on Friday 3 September 2010. It rained throughout with the odd flash of lightning and roll of thunder. Professor Eric Richards and Dick Findley offered eulogies. Archivists in attendance included John Love, Jane Thimke, Leigh McElroy and Peter Crush.

Compiled by Peter Crush with valued assistance of text and information from Professor Eric Richards and Ms Jane Thimke.

Endnotes

- ¹ Professor Eric Richards, unpublished eulogy read at Gerald Fischer's funeral, 3 September 2010.
- ² GL Fischer, unpublished notes entitled, 'A long held interest in history', dated April 2004.
- ³ JD Somerville Oral History Collection, Mortlock Library of South Australia: Interview No. OH551, address by Gerald Fischer to the Annual General Meeting of the South Australian Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists, 30 August 1999.
- ⁴ Fischer, 'A long held interest in history'.
- ⁵ Unpublished tape content summary by J Thimke for ASA/NLA oral history, tape 2, recorded 17 November 2000.
- ⁶ GL Fischer, 'Archival Development in South Australia', *Australian Library Journal*, April 1969, p. 77.
- ⁷ GL Fischer, 'The history of South Australian Archives: Some notes on archival development in SA 1836-1968', in G Jaunay (ed.), *10 years on: Celebrating the tenth anniversary of The Friends of South Australia's Archives*, Adelaide Proformat, Adelaide, 2006, p. 65.
- ⁸ Fischer, 'Archival Development in South Australia', p. 77.
- ⁹ GL Fischer, *In Memorium Gwenda Clare Fischer*, Pump Press, Brighton, 1998, p. 5.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*
- ¹¹ GL Fischer, 'Revised Interim notes for Records Control by Groups', unpublished, prepared November 1967, State Records of South Australia, GRG56/42/8.
- ¹² Richards, eulogy read at Gerald Fischer's funeral, 3 September 2010.
- ¹³ JL Cleland, 'The Guide to Collections of Manuscripts Relating to Australia: an outline and assessment', *Archives & Manuscripts*, vol. 3, no. 3, November 1966, p. 16.
- ¹⁴ Richards, eulogy read at Gerald Fischer's funeral, 3 September 2010.
- ¹⁵ Unpublished tape content summary by J Thimke for ASA/NLA oral history, tape 4, recorded 25 November 2000.
- ¹⁶ GL Fischer, *A List of Pump Press limited edition publications (1956 - 1996)*.
- ¹⁷ GL Fischer, 'The Rationale behind *The Friends*: Some notes and recollections', in Jaunay (ed.), *10 years on*, p. 10.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 11.
- ¹⁹ Richards, eulogy read at Gerald Fischer's funeral, 3 September 2010.