



Robert Charles Sharman (1928–2018)



Bob Sharman, credit Tim Robinson

Bob Sharman died peacefully in Hobart on 28 August 2018, just short of 90 years old. Providing an account of his life and achievements is, for us, a sad and important task. We knew him as a friend and professional colleague. As well, one of us shared his strong interest in Tasmanian history and the challenges of leading an archival organisation, while the other was one of his students when he lectured at the Canberra College of Advanced Education in 1971 and was on the ASA Council in the early 1990s when he was its Treasurer.

What follows is confined to his career and contributions primarily as an archivist. Some mention of his many connections to the library world will also be made although this inevitably leaves out many other areas. Pre-eminent among them was his foundational and lifelong membership of the Tasmanian Historical Research Association (THRA). He was an early invitee to give its prestigious Eldershaw Lecture, joining a who's who of leading Australian historians. Fittingly, his last published work was a 60th anniversary history of the Association published in its *Papers and Proceedings* in December 2011; the following year he was made its Patron.

Bob's family, religious and private life are also not our concern here, but some brief mention needs to be made of two aspects of his personal life to which he refers in his

extensive oral history, which is now publicly available. The first was the episode of polio which he suffered as a nine and a half year-old boy in 1938. The previous year, 1937, Tasmania had reportedly had the world's highest per capita incidence of polio in children. The diagnosis resulted in his confinement for two years at the Launceston General Hospital (at least some of that time in splints), followed by another two years at the St Giles Home for Crippled Children (as it was then known) also in Launceston. He was about forty miles from his home and in 1938 in Tasmania it might as well have been four hundred. His parents saw him once a fortnight.

As he says, 'that was the biggest early influence on my life'. A little later in his 1995 interview he was even more candid: 'I think this was fundamental to the rest of my life really because of the fact that I felt abandoned really.' Significantly, he returned to this experience in a revealing farewell editorial for the WA State Library Service's *Open Access* just before he retired in September 1988, from which it becomes clear that the sense of abandonment was based on not being told what was happening nor why. Thus he concluded that responsible management should be grounded in 'the need to communicate, to explain what you have done, why you have done it, and how you proceeded to make your decision'.

The other significant aspect was, as he put it, 'I became a socialist from very early in my career ... I just have had a strong intellectual lean towards the left in politics.' Apart from university he said he never had any involvement in party politics but throughout his career one can see the strong sense of concern for others and their rights and his strong sense of fair play in every stage of his career. And his sense of outrage when these were threatened or violated.

Tasmania, 1949–59

Bob Sharman's archival career was made possible when the position of Archives Officer, allowed for in Tasmania's *Public Records Act, 1943*, was finally advertised in 1949. Libraries were there at the start as well – for administrative purposes the position was located within the State Library. In recruiting him it acquired a 21-year-old newly graduated Bachelor of Arts who had passed the then Australian Institute of Librarians' Preliminary Examination and had worked briefly in the University of Tasmania Library as a Junior Library Assistant. Almost immediately, he was required to add, in 1950 in Sydney, a year-long course run by the Library School of the Public Library of NSW.

The series of records waiting for him in the Chief Secretary's vault under the Supreme Court were in urgent need of attention. From this base, he and a most talented assistant (and later deputy and then successor), Peter Eldershaw, developed procedures for transfers and accessioning and began a service to researchers. And soon enough he forged a reputation for integrity and, when needed, a resolve unusual given his relative youth in working with the State Librarian, agency heads and senior academics.

Some professional issues which emerged in the 1950s were to exercise Bob's mind and emotions for the rest of his life. One was the idea of an active Australia-wide profession he glimpsed while in Sydney in 1950 when he met Ian Maclean, sensed first hand in Canberra in 1954 at the Schellenberg seminars, and helped try to formalise in Melbourne in 1958.

A second, which also stretched back to that year in Sydney (when he learned that the Mitchell and Dixon collections included important nineteenth-century government Tasmanian records), concerned legislative and other remedies for better dealing with archival estrays. His accounts of developments in Tasmania and later Queensland and Western Australia all cited instances of records of official origin in the wrongful custody of collectors or former public servants. In his magisterial chapter 'Archives and Research' for *Design for Diversity* (Harrison Bryan and Gordon Greenwood's 1977 survey of library services for higher education), he wrote with real frustration of 'the depredations of curio seekers and the operations of traffickers in stolen documents'. Elsewhere he wrote of the limitations of recovery in the courts and instances of one or two exchanges of former estrays between state archives.

Queensland, 1959–70

In 1959, after 10 years of pioneering effort in Hobart, Bob took on another foundational role in Brisbane, where a part of the Libraries Act previously dormant since 1943 was promulgated to help mark a centenary of self-government. The official explanation for the 15-year delay was lack of suitable space for storage and display.

Once again, all the basic processes and policies needed attention; once again, the reporting line was to the State Librarian (if technically to the Library Board of Queensland). He was older and surer of himself professionally now, and needed to be, for the distances involved in surveying government offices in Townsville, Cairns and Cooktown were challenging, and as for the records storage he inherited, he once described the Commissariat building as 'accessible to white ants, cockroaches, silver fish, book worm and drunks'.

That by 1968 a new fire-resistant white-ant-free and at least partly air-conditioned building at Dutton Park was secured was a crucial result, and one achieved against the resistance of the Library Board and, as Bob put it in a 2004 published recollection, 'achieved over the bruises and wounds caused by a bitter conflict between me and my boss the State Librarian (Jim Stapleton)'. As he also was apt to remind people, the old State Stores building was completely inundated in the January 1974 Brisbane floods.

Australian National University (ANU), 1970–72

Having served pioneering roles in two state government archives reporting to librarians, Bob Sharman's two years as Archives Officer at the ANU could not have been more different. He took over an established operation within an academic setting and reported to the economic historian Dr Alan Barnard, Chair of the Archive Committee within the Research School of Social Sciences. Once he managed archives under legislation drawing material from departments and authorities; now they had to be coaxed from businesses and trade unions stretching from Cairns in Queensland to Liverpool in England.

Collecting was a particular theme of his tenure, requiring travel back to Queensland to arrange physical uplift and microfilming, and while in the UK attending international and Commonwealth library conferences, negotiating deposits. But worries about

accommodation challenged him yet again as the archives' temporary home in the Coombs building was increasingly needed for student and staff. At the time Barnard and the School Head began renegotiating an existing unconventional agreement with the National Library whereby archives were stored there except when needed by ANU academics, but a proper solution only emerged after Bob left. His proposals that the Archives take responsibility for the ANU's current records took three more decades to be realised.

Typically, in Canberra there were also additional workloads. Having been appointed in 1960, he continued as editor of *Archives and Manuscripts*; in 1971 he was President of the Library Association of Australia (LAA); and in that same year he designed and taught a new Archives and Manuscripts unit for a postgraduate library program at the Canberra College of Advanced Education assisted by Doreen Wheeler, who had worked for him in Brisbane and who was recruited to the ANU Archives as his Deputy.

South Australia, 1972–76

Towards the end of 1971, two things combined to turn Bob's gaze beyond Canberra. Not for the last time, the Archives Unit's future was under a cloud. Added to employment uncertainty, he wrote revealingly in 2004 that a second factor was 'my own diffidence when approaching prospective depositors'. In his oral history, he remarked, 'I was very much a transactional archivist. I wasn't an historical manuscripts man, I was very much a government archives man.' He was reflecting in part on what he saw as a weakness. He didn't like and didn't think he was very successful in persuading private firms and organisations, or indeed families, to donate their archival and manuscript collections.

So when a vacancy at deputy level within the State Library of South Australia conveniently aligned with growing library credentials, which at the time included Presidency of the LAA and years of service with its Board of Examiners, he successfully applied. By March 1972 he was in Adelaide.

At the State Library, responsibilities covered lending services, bibliographical services and government departmental libraries and references services throughout the state. It was a time of considerable change in library activism and policy ferment; Whitlam was in Canberra and Don Dunstan in Adelaide as Premier for a second and extended time. Within the library, restructures began the same year Bob arrived, resulting in new approaches to services for children, Aboriginal communities, adult education and readers with special needs. In 1975 a Committee on Library Services to Meet Special Needs was formed and fittingly he chaired its work and wrote its report to the Minister for Education.

For the only time in his career, in Adelaide, archives were neither directly nor indirectly part of his responsibilities, although editorship of *Archives and Manuscripts* among many professional archival involvements continued. The Archives Department, operating from 1919 and created by Australia's first archives legislation in 1925, was still there in name and authority in the 1970s and still responsible to the Libraries Board of South Australia. Its independence-creating legislation was decades away.

Western Australia, 1976–88

Serving at the head of the State Library of Western Australia was Bob's final and longest appointment, and probably the time when his many qualities and abilities were tested to their limits. And here, ironically and finally, the state archivist reported to him. But we can readily discern continuities too; as in Queensland, he disliked being confined to the office and the capital city. After he retired, one colleague wrote 'he remained a people's librarian', explaining that he 'travelled thousands of kilometres on the country circuit and was seldom happier than when listening to his Shakespearean tapes as he drove along the red dusty road to Useless Loop or stepped off a light aircraft at Cockatoo Island'. He was even able to arrange a Library Board meeting in the small goldfields town of Menzies to celebrate the final local government authority joining the library network.

This tenure coincided with a time of emerging interest in library automation, increasing pressure on book budgets, and acceptance of the need for national policies on libraries, information and cultural heritage. New forums and machinery were established, including the Australian Library and Information Council and the Australian Council for Libraries and Information Services. Remarkably, Bob found the time to contribute through membership, discussion and submissions.

If his final major role had a crowning achievement, it was the development and completion of the Alexander Library Building, which was opened in mid-1985. Bob had inherited documentation from his predecessor FA Sharr, and the year he arrived the site was settled. For the next nine years he worked tirelessly with architects, Treasury, stakeholders, conflicting agendas and shifting functional requirements. He retired on his 60th birthday in September 1988, and was made a Fellow of the Library Board.

For an obituary to attempt assessing anybody's professional standing is inappropriate and premature, though our focus here is on someone with few equals in Australian archival history. Even so, the preceding outline of career appointments in five capital cities between 1949 and 1988 covers only half the story, for Bob's post-retirement involvements were equally extensive. But from the many tributes offered during his career and beyond, two themes strike us as especially noteworthy, namely editing and educating.

Before proceeding, however, we should acknowledge numerous career and retirement links with the library sector and through it with committees such as the Literature Board of the Australian Council for the Arts and the Australian National Commission for UNESCO. These links go well beyond the performance of his archival roles within library structures, their definitive enumeration many pages long.

While Bob felt strongly archivists were a separate profession and should be independent of library control, he favoured active engagement to address common concerns and argue for independence. More than cooperation, this included many contributions to the LAA's flagship journal and other publications, a decade from 1960 with its Board of Examiners, organising the 14th Biennial Conference in 1967 and holding office as National President in 1971–72. In Queensland he edited the LAA state branch newsletter *Quill*, and in South Australia in 1976, was Branch President.

At the national level he served on a number of bodies such as the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services, chairing its General Council between 1981 and 1984, and contributing to its Standing Committee and various working parties. In the case of the Australian Council for Libraries and Information Services, he was involved in its formation. Even in retirement, he continued an interest in library services to children – first evident when WA State Librarian. During the early 1990s for example he edited *Orana*, the quarterly journal of the School Libraries Section and the Children's and Youth Services Section.

Much appreciated by library colleagues and peers, he was readily acknowledged for his leadership at the national level and for pursuing the preservation of national heritage and national statistics. In 1964 he had been made a Fellow of the LAA, and in 1988 as mentioned, a Fellow of the Library Board of Western Australia.

Even so, Bob's strongest and most enduring loyalties were archival. When he became a founding member of the ASA in 1975 and bequeathed a fully operational *Archives and Manuscripts*, he had already served a term as President of the LAA's Archives Section and four years as Secretary. In the following decades he served on Council (Treasurer, 1991–93 and Managing Editor, 1995–97), was Editor of the *ASA Bulletin* (1994–97) and contributed to numerous branch committees. In the 1990s he edited the WA Branch newsletter *Western Archives*. He helped organise annual conferences, chaired sessions, delivered papers and delivered an invited keynote for the 1993 ASA conference. Later published in *Archives and Manuscripts* as 'The Hollow Crown', this was a tour de force prepared in the wake of the WA Inc Royal Commission and addressing the recordkeeping–accountability nexus.

Already the ASA's first Honorary Life Member, further acknowledgments came in 1994 when Bob was made a Fellow of the Society and in 2000 when an award to support attendance at the annual conference was named in his honour. Respected for his judgement and integrity, he accepted invitations to serve on the National Archives of Australia Advisory Council (1995–98), be the first convenor of the ASA's Awards Committee in 1992, a trustee of its Public Fund in 1993 and first convenor of its Mander Jones Awards Committee in 1996.

Editing *Archives and Manuscripts*

The first issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* (A&M) – the Journal of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia – appeared in November 1955 then intermittently until 1960 when Bob became editor. He guided it for the next 15 years, handing over to the ASA's first and grateful editor, Andrew Lemon, after his final issue in November 1975. From May 1972 he also edited the Archives Section's newsletter, including it in A&M and mailing separate off-prints to non-subscribing members of the Archives Section.

Reviewing those 39 issues now – a number quite thin, the formats, printing and covers variable – it is obvious what a challenge he faced. Occasionally in editorials and in reports to annual meetings of the Archives Section, Bob elaborated on his worries with production, costs, minimal help from the LAA and especially the lack of quality copy. It is remarkable that he succeeded at all – almost singlehandedly – with content,

production, subscriptions, mail-outs, finances and correspondence, while heavily involved in additional professional work and of course his demanding everyday work.

On occasions the shortage of content meant the editor himself became author and book reviewer. He also sought material, including news notes, directly from former employees, students, researchers and colleagues speaking at archives section meetings of the LAA's biennial conferences. More than once material already published elsewhere was republished, and in most years he was able to secure something from New Zealand. There were also reports of annual meetings of the Archives Section, and from the early 1970s, as the numbers for a separate archives society gained momentum, a regular 'Miscellany' section from Michael Saclier.

Most issues carried an Editorial, a number of substantial length and import. In some he expressed strong opinions, and once or twice, showed real anger. One editorial ('The Discourtesy of SMOS', May 1975) concerned delays in filling the position of Australian Archives Director-General, created following recommendations made after the 1973 visit of the Canadian national archivist W Kaye Lamb. Applicants had heard nothing for almost a year, then learnt the position was being re-advertised by the relevant department, Special Minister for State. Another editorial examined the then new *Victorian Public Records Act, 1973* because, despite frequent requests over five years made of the Victorian State Archives for news about developments, these had been 'almost invariably met with a response which can best be summed up in a single word, "None"' ('Victory in Victoria', August 1973). Two years later, reflecting on his editorship, he singled out the lack of support of the Archives Section of the State Library of Victoria 'under which Harry Nunn maintained a truculent silence towards the corpus of archival professionals'.

More than once during 1960-75, doubts arose as to whether the still-developing archives profession was mature and diverse enough to actually sustain a separate journal. Looking back in 1975 as he handed over to the new Australian Society of Archivists, Bob wrote in A&M that 'the wisdom of hindsight suggests that it was not'. It had begun in 1955 as *Bulletin for Australian Archivists* with enthusiasm fired by the visit of the leading US archivist Dr T R Schellenberg in 1954, but after just two issues could not be sustained without support from the LAA. The price paid was a change of title and some writing by manuscripts librarians.

The struggle for content was not helped by the deliberate refusal of staff, with few exceptions, at the then Commonwealth Archives Office and some state and university archives to have anything to do with the journal because it was produced under the auspices of the LAA. During the 1950s and 60s Ian Maclean, Peter Scott, David Macmillan and Allan Horton all wrote for the *American Archivist*, Macmillan and Maclean also writing for the UK Society of Archivists. Bob was still expressing irritation (in a co-edited A&M editorial) in November 2005. No stranger himself to the arguments favouring the independence of archives from libraries, he believed the needs of professional development outweighed boycott, and was clearly hurt, ending his 20th anniversary reflections hoping for leadership within the profession from the then Australian Archives and observing: 'There is probably no medium through which such leadership can be better demonstrated than through the professional journal that stands to serve them.'

Educating by communicating

Across the years of Bob's career and professional life we can recognise three broad audiences: librarians, historians and his fellow archivists. The record of his engagement working with them is self-evident, and we are fortunate also to have the legacy of a very extensive record of published writing.

To Bob, librarians were not the enemy, though he lived through a period which has been styled an archival 'war for independence'. And there were times when he found reporting to them deeply frustrating. Most needed educating, however. In the *Australian Library Journal* (e.g. 'Library control of Archives', July 1960) and at LAA conferences and elsewhere he sought to explain how archives were different from library materials, why for official records their own legislation was required, why they needed their own professional education and training programs, and why library approaches were so inappropriate for documentation appraisal and access provision. He also wanted to remind librarians that they should be proud of their archivist colleagues (e.g. 'Modest practitioners, Australian Archival Achievements since 1944', July 1974).

Historians were not the enemy either. The relevant major conference addresses and publications show that Bob readily acknowledged their often crucial role in initiating archival developments. But he also felt they needed a clearer appreciation of all of the archivist's challenges. As he explained in a much-quoted 1969 paper 'Causation in historical study', what made properly managed archives such valuable historical evidence was a watchfulness by properly trained archivists that 'the integrity of series is maintained'. He knew in relation to government archives that historians rankled under rules unreasonably restrictive, poorly justified and inefficiently applied. At the same time he chided them for being fair-weather friends once their research areas of interest changed, for caring little about administrative history and, with a few exceptions, for failing to help archivists secure professional standing and adequate resources.

Bob's archival colleagues were, inevitably, an entirely more complicated matter. In the pre-ASA years his role was of an encourager, sharing his newly acquired knowledge and experience, and rejoicing when staff recruitment decisions were immediately vindicated (e.g. Peter Eldershaw in Tasmania and Doreen Wheeler in Queensland). He kept urging colleagues to be active within their profession usually through appeals in *Archives and Manuscripts*, with some, such as an item headed 'A Non-Communicating Profession' (August 1975), conveying irony and exasperation.

As he grew older, he turned towards drawing lessons and describing the Australian archival developments, his papers to the 1977 ('Starting an archives') and 1989 ('More muddle than melodrama: lifting the lid on government secrecy in two states') biennial conferences classics of their kind. In the former he summed up what constitutes a professional person. While the views underpinning it were later expanded on in an essay for *Archifacts* in October 1996 ('What does professionalism mean?'), despite the gender specificity, it is worth reproducing here:

My definition of a professional person is one who is called upon to make value judgements, and who can make them, and enunciate his decisions without fear of an accusation of partiality: he must be able to justify his judgements by reference to a body of knowledge and an area of study which commands respect in the community; and he must be able to

progress from the stage of making value judgements to that of implementing them without prejudice or thought of personal gain.

In summary

In looking back over Bob Sharman's career, one aspect which deserves singling out was a quality present from the outset of his career and from which he never wavered. That is his willingness to participate, to be involved, to do the hard work and to volunteer for all the tasks associated with developing and nurturing an organisation and a profession. He was minute secretary, secretary, author, editor, president and patron, whatever it took at the time to get things going and keep them going. He was lecturer, teacher and course designer. At the very outset it was as Minute Secretary of the embryonic THRA at its very first meeting and at the conclusion, his final offices in the ASA as Treasurer, then again as Managing Editor and Editor of the ASA Newsletter, the last of these ending in 1997. In Hobart in August 2015 at the ASA annual conference, there he was, well into his eighties, still contributing (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pSMXYusdAM). He was always doing, never just cheering.

Acknowledgements

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Michael Piggott
 mpiggott@live.com.au

George Nichols