

OBITUARY

Dr Peter John Tyler, 1934–2012 **Scholar and administrative historian**

Peter John Tyler was born at the Royal North Shore Hospital on Saint Patrick's Day, 17 March 1934, the eldest child of Ambrose Seymour Tyler (known as John) and Maisie Clara Tyler. Peter passed away on Saturday 5 May 2012.

Peter started his schooling at Ashbury Primary School. Because he was a precocious child, who could already read, he skipped the first year of primary school and spent two years in 2nd Class under Miss Bird, who nurtured his love for classical music. During the war, Peter's father was posted to Tamworth and, later, to Singleton, where Peter completed his primary schooling.

Peter's father was a career public servant, who was demobilised promptly at the end of the war, in order to take up an appointment as Assistant Secretary of the New South Wales Ministry of Housing. He later became Secretary and Permanent Head of that Department, where he subsequently stayed until retirement.

After settling at Asquith, Peter commenced his secondary schooling at Knox Grammar School and completed his Leaving Certificate in 1950. Because he did not matriculate as hoped, he accepted a position as a junior clerk at Ku-ring-gai Municipal Council. After a period of four years, he moved to Mosman Municipal Council and became a Justice of the Peace at the unusually young age of 21.

By then, he had become deeply involved with amateur theatre, first, with the Pymble Players and, later, with Questers Little Theatre, with co-founder Brian Paine. He tried his hand at various aspects of theatre – acting, directing and designing sets. At this time, Peter seriously considered applying for a place as an acting student in the newly formed National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA). However, he settled for a behind-the-scenes role, when Brian Paine introduced him to the Arts Council of New South Wales, where he commenced employment in 1960.

When he saw an advertisement for a job with WEA – the Workers Educational Association – Peter decided to apply, although he did not think that he had any of the required credentials to secure the position. To his surprise, he was offered the position of Secretary for the Sydney Metropolitan Region, which was, in effect, the position of CEO of the major adult-education provider in New South Wales, with the salary and status of a university lecturer, despite his lack of tertiary education. He stayed with WEA for 15 years, during which time, student enrolments doubled, and a new education centre was built in Bathurst Street, following some shrewd real estate deals. Following a short time at the National Association for Training the Disabled in Office Work, Peter joined the management team for three linked organisations that catered for the industrial and professional interests of local government health and building surveyors. Peter soon became National Secretary of the Australian Institute of Environmental Health (now Environmental Health Australia) and editor of their national journal. For the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988, he organised the Inaugural World

Congress of Environmental Health, attracting 1,200 delegates from 25 countries to a week-long conference at the Sydney Opera House.

During this period, he completed a Graduate Diploma in Adult Education with Sydney Teachers College. He used this qualification to gain admission as a part-time external student to the University of New England (UNE) for a Bachelor of Arts degree, which he completed, some eight years later.

After seven years with the health and building surveyors, Peter was appointed Executive Director of the Building and Construction Council of New South Wales (BACC). Three years later, he took up an appointment as Director of the Building Careers Centre. At this time, he completed a Master of Letters degree with Distinction for a dissertation on the history of his former employer, the Australian Institute of Environmental Health. Encouraged by this achievement, Peter then enrolled for a doctoral degree at UNE, for which he received a university scholarship.

When lack of funding forced the Building Careers Centre to close in 1999, Peter continued with BACC in a part-time capacity, having reached the traditional retiring age of 65.

He was elected Chairman of the New South Wales Construction Industry Training Advisory Board for the maximum term of four years.

For Peter, 1998 was an eventful year. He was diagnosed with cancer and underwent successful major abdominal surgery. At the end of the year, he completed his PhD thesis, after 8 years of hard work. The Doctorate was awarded in April 2000, for a historical study of the Board of Health from 1880 to 1973.

With this qualification, Peter set up practice as an accredited professional historian. His commissioned Jubilee history of the Australian Institute of Building, *To Provide a Joint Conscience*, was published in September 2001. This was followed by the anniversary history of the Anti Tuberculosis Association, *No Charge – No Undressing*, in 2003, and volume 2 of the administrative history of New South Wales, *Humble and Obedient Servants*, published in 2006, by State Records New South Wales.

To mark the jubilee of archives legislation in Australia, *State Records NSW, 1788–2011* was published in June 2011. During the research for this book, Peter was embedded in State Records' city office and became an honorary staff member.

His exceptional work in the field of administrative history led to a commission by the Royal Society of New South Wales to prepare a history of that scientific body, since its origins in 1821, which, at the time of his death, was incomplete. In August 2008, he was awarded the inaugural Merewether Scholarship by the State Library of New South Wales to conduct research into early scientific institutions in Australia during the nineteenth century, and, in 2011, he began research for the Australian Respiratory Council, the text of which was due to be published in 2013. Peter was also the President of the Professional Historians Association of New South Wales for a number of years, as well as the President of the Society of the History of Medicine.

Over recent years, Peter also undertook consultancy work for numerous clients. He contributed book reviews for historical journals, and he was occasional guest speaker at events at the State Library of New South Wales and other cultural institutions. In 2011, he spoke to the New South Wales Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists about his experiences as an administrative historian, in general, and the writing of his book, *State Records NSW, 1788–2011*. Peter was a great supporter, advocate and friend of archivists and librarians.