

Obituaries

Jim (Herbert James) Gibbney

Jim Gibbney died in Canberra last August. While most people today will remember Jim as an enthusiastic user and friend of archives, he was one of our archival pioneers, having joined the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library in 1952. He had previously attended the foundation meeting of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia in 1951, and following the Schellenberg seminars in 1954, he and Allan Horton (then Senior Archivist at the Public Library of New South Wales) produced the first issue of the *Bulletin for Australian Archivists*. In 1955, the Archives Section of the LAA assumed control of this journal (a second issue having been produced by Allan Horton in March 1955) and renamed it *Archives and Manuscripts*. Jim edited the new journal until November 1959.

Ian Maclean writes:

When it was suggested that I write this tribute to Jim, there straightway sprang into my mind what a most kind Queensland State Library officer identified as the opening words of the first paragraph of Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities*—"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times"—because I recalled the 1960s and particularly those years 1961-1965 when the newly separated Commonwealth Archives Office did, as had been predicted by one in a position to know, wither on the vine. Jim's disappointed departure to the ranks of the Australian Dictionary of Biography in 1965 was one of two professional losses at that period which I have always regretted and felt responsible for. It has been something of a comfort to know that both people contributed successfully and even more directly to the historical profession; and it has been even more of a comfort, even in these sorrowful circumstances, to note the evidence of Jim's remarkable personal and professional achievements in Professor Ken Inglis' address at the funeral and in Chris Cunneen's obituary in the *Canberra Times*. However, while both tributes could emphasise his personal warmth, kindness, sense of humour and professional integrity together with his early and late academic achievements in the context of his roles with the Dictionary and as Canberra historian and honorary archivist, there was little about his professional archival career. It is the period up to 1965 that I must primarily address myself.

My memory of who served where and when between 1950 and 1965 is decidedly patchy, a period which saw many developments: the record

reduction campaign; the setting up of the interstate system of repositories; the Schellenberg visit; the development of policy for the professional Archival Authority system by the Commonwealth Archives Committee; the Paton Committee of Inquiry; my Public Service Scholarship to England, USA, Canada, and, briefly, the Continent; and then of course the establishment of the Commonwealth Archives Office. That fast changing period saw Jim in several places at short notice, assignments which he cheerfully accepted (despite his rueful comment that his preparation for 'active service' was no more than a rapid reading of Jenkinson and Muller Feith and Fruin and a few files). Actually, as I recall in mild defence, he was transferred from the Australiana Section of the National Library and presumably therefore was considered to be at least partially 'acclimatised'. All that aside, he did many jobs well. Perhaps to readers of this journal, the most significant was his pioneering, with Alan Horton, following the Schellenberg seminars, of the early issues of *Archives and Manuscripts*. To me, perhaps his most successful coup was in assisting, by inspired use of records of the Custodian of Enemy Property of the 1914-18 War, the Department of External Territories to re-establish property entitlements in what was New Britain after the Japanese occupation. At this point I would also refer to a number of appreciative references I encountered during recent work on the correspondence of Gavin Long and his War History Section, to Jim's assistance in respect particularly of Information Department records and what remained of the Papua and British New Guinea pre-war records.

So to the early half of the 1960s. It started well in prospect. We were a separate entity and my observations overseas and indeed reception there was good cause to believe we were on the right lines. An inter-departmental committee was beginning work on future developments—Jim and I both worked on its documentation. That the report of the Committee never got beyond draft stage is the external evidence of the internal problem or rather two inter-related problems. Administratively I found it impossible to produce propositions for professional expansion (we had fewer professionals than there are now Directors in the Australian Archives) in terms understandable to my departmental administrators; one (an extutor) did understand, swore to act and died on the golf course within weeks. This problem was certainly in large part because we could not see the solution to the fitting of the conventional 'archives group' approach to the ever-changing administrative structures and the constant reorganisation of record series. Of course, Peter Scott's 1966 insight, which opened the way to the CRS development, was the start of that; but too late of course to counter the deterioration of staff morale and relations. Throughout all this time Jim worked hard and produced some excellent reference service for those lucky enough to be able to overcome the 50 year barrier—his personal charm, innate honesty and indeed remarkable perseverance continued but against the odds. One remarkable effort

illustrates how dedicated he was to the archival cause. He learnt German with specific intent to translate a newly arrived German archival manual. He did it though only as far as I am aware to a pencilled manuscript stage. It was a bad period, indeed it took time well after Peter Scott's breakthrough to work itself out. At least for everyone directly concerned (including certainly myself) it has turned out for the better. What is so sad, is that Jim had so little time and hence Delia and his children had so little time to enjoy his relative retirement—one can't imagine Jim completely retired. I would just like to close with one more quotation (arising from what some may consider was my non-archival near profession). Jim was so much his own unique personality that he might well have been the recipient of the advice —“To thine own self be true, thou canst not then be false to any man”.

At Jim's funeral, Ken Inglis spoke:

The mid-1950s turned out to be a good time for Jim Gibbney the author to have arrived in Canberra, for 30 years later he was chosen to write a history of Canberra from 1913 to 1953, a terminal date which enabled Jim to end the book with a lightly concealed autobiography. He gives a vivid account of arriving in the bush capital, he describes such eye-sores as the National Library's recycled Nissen huts, which were installed about the time he and Delia settled in bleak new O'Connor. And he writes that at this time, “Canberra was a cosy and friendly community, in which those attending the two picture theatres or occasions in the Albert Hall were certain to know almost everybody present.”

A cosy and friendly community. You could say that also of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, a great enterprise and also a homely one: an intellectual factory producing goods essential for scholarly research and national self-knowledge, and also a kind of family—“The Dic”, Jim always called it, that affectionate diminutive humanising an institution. As intellectual producer Jim assembled more than 80 entries in the ADB; as an increasingly senior member of the family, he contributed singularly to making and keeping the Dic a cosy and friendly community. He worked loyally, harmoniously and productively with all his general editors, and when he wrote that history of Canberra in retirement, the present general editor John Ritchie was one of his academic supervisors.

Jim completed an ANU MA degree while working full-time for the Dic, and this year was awarded the ANU's Ph D. There aren't many people in the world who have conferred on them an *earned* rather than an honorary doctorate at the age of 66; and it's an even rarer achievement to have your thesis published as a book before it earns you the degree.

I first heard the name Jim Gibbney at Adelaide in the late 1950s, when he wrote to a friend of his undergraduate days in Perth who was now a colleague of mine, asking him to pass on to likely users precise

and wide-ranging information about the archival riches for Australian studies lying unused in Canberra—unused, but thanks to work he was now in charge of, more and more accessible. With no sense of frustration he worked hard at clearing ground for other scholars to work. In person as in print, he was a marvellous aid to other scholars. One colleague remembers him as “my walking resource”. Jim would ask “What are you working on?”, and spoken and written hints would begin to flow. *Literally* a walking resource: how many of those thoughts about other people’s work must have come to him as he stepped it out each day between O’Connor and Acton? By the time Jim wrote his own books he had all the equipment for the job, and he used his own and other people’s aids with zest. If you pick up the booklet put out by the ANU Archives of Business and Labour you see a picture captioned “Using the descriptive finding aids”. The user is Jim Gibbney, and the photograph wasn’t staged: he just happened to be there at that time, as at many others.

Penny Fisher

Penelope Anne Kininmonth, better known to us as Penny Fisher, died on Tuesday, 31 January 1989. She was 35.

Andrew Lemon writes:

“Anyone who has worked with archives knows that death is often arbitrary and unfair. So it has been with Penny Fisher, a woman full of life, with much, much more that she would have given to her profession had the time been given to her. The contribution she had already made was remarkable, characterised by that quality of vitality. Archives to her was a live profession.”

Penny’s vitality was indeed her most striking quality. A vibrant and gutsy woman she brought to her profession those qualities that enriched all aspects of her life. Penny reached out to other people and touched their lives with her bright, unquenchable spirit. Colleagues readily recall her inimitable style and charm, her unfailing and at times zany sense of humour, and the great pleasure of her company. Life for Penny was an adventure and to know her was to become part of the fun.

Although most of us have known Penny as a city person, she grew up in the Western District and boarded at the Hermitage in Geelong before enrolling at Monash University from where she graduated in Economics and Politics in 1974. She continued to have strong ties with her family’s rural community and was fiercely loyal to the local footy team. Frank Upward’s special memory of Penny is of the annual trek to Geelong of a group of Tiger supporters led by the late Roger Joyce to meet the Cats’ contingent headed by Penny in the outer at Kardinia Park for the Geelong vs Richmond clash.