

Obituary

Sir Harold White, 1905-1992

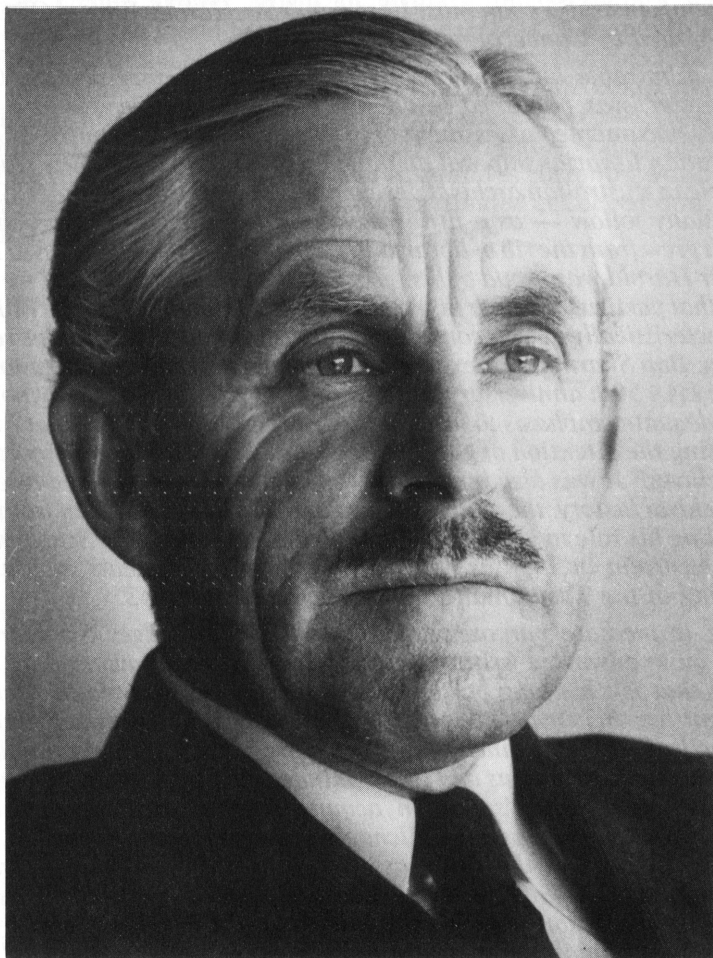
One of Australia's foremost librarians, Sir Harold White, CBE MA FLAA, died in Canberra on 31 August 1992.

An admirable biographical summary by his former deputy, C. A. Burmester, was published last year,¹ and a calm objective and thoroughly documented assessment of his very considerable contribution to Australian librarianship will doubtless soon appear. As for any study of his role in Australian archival development, we may expect that this will eventually follow — as a fitting echo of the sequence of so much else which grew from the rib of librarianship in the days before the ASA. Even so, Sir Harold was proud of his record in the archives field, and we may note that particularly after his retirement as National Librarian in 1970, characteristically he was concerned that his work be accorded due recognition. Bob Sharman for example has related how he was taken to task at the LAA 50th anniversary celebrations in 1987 for apparently not giving adequate emphasis to his and the National Library's pivotal role in directing the attention of governments and librarians to the importance of archives!² It was also in 1987 that, in connection with some research on archival history, the editor received an hour-long phone call from him detailing his role in apparently single-handedly having Dr Schellenberg visit Australia in 1954 as well as in earlier developments such as the drafting of the Tasmanian Public Records Act of 1943.

For immediate purposes, this Journal acknowledges Sir Harold's early quite advanced writing on archives (early and advanced for Australia that is); his long participation on the Commonwealth Archives Committee; his involvement with branches of the Business Archives Council of Australia, including a Vice-Presidency with the Victorian Branch; and his vigorous and single-minded efforts to obtain and defend the National Library's role in acquiring government and business records, one episode in which Michael Saclier has recently revealed.³ His competitive zeal in the 1950s associated with the National Library's assumption of the Guide to Pre-Federation Archives project, and associated with the Paton inquiry into, inter alia, the Library's role beyond that of provisional national archives, have also been documented. His membership of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia, support of the Australian Joint Copying Project, and contribution

to the preservation of film and sound archives should also be acknowledged.

As a prelude to future full assessments, we present two pieces about Sir Harold by ASA members: one, an assessment by someone who joined the Library three years before Sir Harold retired and who came to know of his work mainly 'from the files' and through familiarity with the collections; the other, a reminiscence by someone who worked directly to him for over fifteen years, primarily as Chief Archivist within the National Library.



Sir Harold White. Credit: Axel Poignant. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Australia.

Harold White — collector of manuscripts**Graeme Powell**

Sir Harold White was not an archivist or a manuscript librarian. For forty-two years he was the Assistant Librarian and then the Librarian of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library and the National Library, directing and managing an institution the staff of which grew from eight in 1928 to over 500 in 1970. In spite of his considerable managerial responsibilities, he was able to devote a great deal of time and enormous energy to collection-building. As a collector, he was interested in a wide range of materials — books, manuscripts, paintings, photographs, films — and he refused to accept any geographical limitations. Collections were pursued not only in Australia but in Britain and America, Brazil and Japan, India and France, Mauritius and Indonesia.

Quite early in his career White became interested in archives and he was disappointed by the decision of the Government to exclude official archives from the responsibilities defined in the National Library Act of 1960. Similarly, it was with extreme reluctance that he agreed to withdraw from the field of business archives in favour of the Archives of Business and Labour at the Australian National University. However, the Library was empowered under its Act to collect manuscripts and White was able to concentrate more of his attention on the quest for manuscripts and personal papers.

One of White's earliest manuscript acquisitions was the 1297 *Inspeximus* issue of the *Magna Carta*, purchased in England in 1942 for £12 500. It had apparently languished unnoticed in a school in Somerset for four centuries. Most of the Library's other medieval manuscripts were received as part of private libraries bought by White. For instance, the Clifford Collection included the 14th century Chertsey Cartulary, as well as several English, French and Italian Psalters, Books of Hours and other other devotional works.

White always recognized the importance of private collectors in assisting the Library to build up substantial research collections. In particular, he knew that the collections assembled by Sir John Ferguson in Sydney and Rex Nan Kivell in London would transform the Library's Australiana collections. He was associated with Ferguson for his entire career, visited him periodically, admired his collection, and provided staff to assist with the compilation of the multi-volume *Bibliography of Australia*. The Ferguson Collection was finally acquired in 1970. Nan Kivell first approached the Library in 1946, shortly before White became Librarian. Again, White corresponded with Nan Kivell regularly, visited him in London, and was deeply involved in the long negotiations for the transfer of the collection. Both the Ferguson and the Nan Kivell Collections were strong in 18th and 19th century papers and by acquiring them in the Library achieved a more balanced manuscript collection.

Commonwealth funds were needed for such acquisitions, but White seldom mentioned money when seeking modern collections of personal papers. Instead, he was adept in persuading a wide range of notable Australians that it was a duty and even an honour to place their papers in the National Library. Considering that the Library was virtually an invisible institution (the building beside Lake Burley Griffin was only opened in 1968), this was a considerable achievement. White had an enormous range of contacts, particularly in the worlds of politics, business, journalism, academia and the arts. Personal acquaintance enabled him to judge the best way of approaching a person for papers and he often took advantage of chance meetings at social events, political or academic gatherings and other occasions. Many of his acquaintances probably shared the feelings of Sir Robert Menzies who said, 'Every time I see Mr White, the Librarian, he looks at me with a gleam in the eye and refrains, just, from saying to me, "Who will get your papers when you are gone?"'

White undoubtedly enjoyed hunting for papers and also the opportunities it gave him to meet and converse with a variety of famous people. He was prepared to be patient and persevering: initial rebuffs were quite common and the process of persuasion could take a long time. White first inspected the Deakin papers in 1945, but twenty years of correspondence and discussion elapsed before this outstanding collection was safely stored in the Library. The papers of another Federation Father, Sir Josiah Symon, took ten years to acquire and White handled the transaction almost single-handedly. In addition to writing letters and cards, he visited Symon's daughter whenever he was in Adelaide and more than once accompanied her on nostalgic pilgrimages to the old Symon home in the Adelaide Hills. Potential donors who came to Canberra were often entertained at White's home, with its magnificent garden, in Mugga Way.

Inevitably, there were defeats and disappointments. Some people felt that White was too insistent, others decided that their first allegiance was to their State capital and not Canberra. The successes were not solely due to White, for he was supported by able staff such as Cliff Burmester, Lindsay Cleland and above all Pauline Fanning. Nevertheless, the enormous growth of the National Library's manuscript collection in the period 1947-1970 owed a great deal to Harold White's ambition, energy and enthusiasm for collection-building on a grand scale.

Long felt admiration and gratitude

Ian Maclean

Some few months ago, on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary launch, at the National Library, of Canberra Repertory Society's History, Sir Harold asked me to autograph his copy, presumably on the

grounds that I had been an early post-war President of the Society which, indeed, had sprung from the pre-war Canberra Society of Arts and Literature, of which he had been the first secretary. I signed it 'with long-felt admiration', and that not because I, a lifelong VFL aficionado, recalled that he had, when Melbourne University was one of the League teams, played as the team's rover.

On reflection I should have added 'and gratitude'. If it had not been for HL (as some of us used to call him) I doubt that I would have been chosen as the first 'Archives Officer' of the National and Parliamentary Library. This is not the time to relate the circumstances of how I, a somewhat bewildered army subaltern, not long returned from Papua New Guinea, came to appear, in mid-October 1944, before the Librarian, Kenneth Binns, as an invited candidate for the vacant post. Suffice it to say that the interview had scarcely started, with me becoming apprehensively aware that 'Archives' was not 'something to do with Hansard', before Binns found it necessary to grant interview to an importunate member. He politely passed me to his Assistant Librarian who would explain to me something of the nature of the work. In less than thirty minutes, HL turned me into a sufficiently embryonic Jenkinsonian to enable me to make the occasional relevant comment during the resumed interview. In the event, little more than two weeks later, discharged with astonishing despatch, I started work, on 30 October, as Alan Ives has vouchsafed.⁴

Shortly after I started work, I had the opportunity to read the seminal paper 'Trends in Archival Administration' which HL had presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Institute of Librarians at Adelaide in June 1940.⁵ That, expanding only slightly on his verbal exposition of the Jenkinsonian thesis, led me on to a study of *The Manual* (1937 edition) itself (with consequences which I have related elsewhere).⁶ It did not seem significant to me at the time that HL's paper, referring to a Society of American Archivists interim report on training,⁷ offered the prospect for a young country like Australia to turn from the English/European emphasis on history, palaeography, diplomatics, etc, and ancient languages, as the prerequisites for archival work, to a wider emphasis on social sciences, including studies on government and politics, and *to the techniques which are common to library and archival science*. Incidentally he reminds the reader in that article that the word 'archives' derives from the Greek root 'archei-' implying 'official' or 'public' rather than 'archai-' implying 'ancient', a point worth remembering in these days when newspaper headlines refer to 'archiving', 'archivers' and so on.

Now the question might reasonably be asked as to why, even granting my valid admiration at the outset, did I, in the light of all that came about later, still spontaneously sign my autograph 'with long-felt

admiration'. In fact our worthy Editor ('he who must be obeyed') in effect anticipated the question by several years, in the course of preparing a masters degree thesis, when he expressed puzzlement that it did not appear 'from the archives' that I had opposed library training for archivists (or had refused to lecture at the Library Training School). Further there was no evidence that I had ever argued in favour of separation of the Archives from the Library, in principle or 'de facto'.

As to the first indictment, I pointed out that HL only raised the matter once. Some little time after the Archives Division was formally established as such, in 1947, he indicated his view that the newly recruited Archives Officers should undergo library training if for no other reason than to improve their promotion prospects, particularly in the event of an amalgamation of the Archives Division with the Australiana Section. I politely expressed my disagreement on the admittedly simplistic basis of my standard argument that there was no comparison between the classification and cataloguing of printed books, etc, and the arrangement and description of non-standard archival material, whether public or non-public; and the subject was never raised again.

As for discussing possible separation, HL and I never discussed the possibility at all. In March 1949, Jack Lang raised, in the House of Representatives, the question of whether and how the Commonwealth Government proposed to deal with the post-war accumulation of records clogging government offices along lines proposed by a United States Presidential Commission Task Force.⁸ By Monday of the following week, HL signed and forwarded a proposal I had drafted to the Public Service Board suggesting a joint survey by the board and the Archives Division aimed particularly at the State capital cities where central office space was desperately short. The survey which became known as the Record Reduction Campaign began in Sydney at the beginning of 1950. Literally every room in every city office was visited; what could be clearly assessed as valueless was destroyed and a temporary repository established for potentially permanent or long term retention of material. Such a repository already existed in embryo in Melbourne and subsequently the process was continued in other States.

Thus began a transition in Australia from British/Continental archives administration in the traditional sense, with its primarily 'cultural' orientation, to what is nowadays sometimes called 'the continuum' of (public) records administration, with its emphasis both on administrative efficiency and *also* the safe-keeping of a cultural end-product which, some thirty years later, the Commonwealth Government has sought to protect through the current, most stringent, Archives Act.

Nineteen fifty-four brought the long-looked-forward-to visit by an archivist from the United States — Dr T. R. Schellenberg, Head of the

National Archives, in what was then the National Archives and Records Service. Not surprisingly he favoured separation when interviewed by the Commonwealth Archives Committee. The Committee's Report, giving fair coverage to arguments, both pro and con, was published and in due course the 'Paton Committee' made its report the results of which are, one assumes, well known.⁹ My only reason for mentioning the sequence of events just referred to is to emphasise that HL knew of my close association both with the Record Reduction Campaign and the Schellenberg program and that, being Executive Officer of the Archives Committee, if I had not myself favoured separation I would have said so. Yet never at any time did HL show any resentment or let it adversely affect necessary administrative relationships. Indeed full support was given to my application for a Commonwealth Public Service Board Scholarship to study, in 1957, archives and records administration, mostly in Britain and the USA, both when it was granted, and later, when deferred until 1958 because of my involvement in a Public Service training scheme.

For all the above I naturally feel admiration and gratitude; and more generally I much admired his skills, not only in respect of the written word but also in his command of the spoken word, whether at the speaker's dais, in conference or in committee; and I echo Graeme Powell's praise for his ability to develop a wide range of associations not only in the Library field or in the environs of Parliament House but also in the wider fields which Canberra offers in such abundance. Indeed had it not been for one or more of these, HL might not have been in a position to assist me in a personal situation, which, despite my totally accidental and innocent involvement, could have had serious consequences.

Yes, I should certainly have signed 'with long-felt admiration *and* gratitude'.

ENDNOTES

1. In Harrison Bryan, ed., *Australia's Library, Information and Archives Services — An Encyclopaedia of Practice and Practitioners*. Volume 3. ALIA Press, Canberra, 1991, pp. 148-150. An assessment of White by another former long serving National Library staff member, Mrs Pauline Fanning, is scheduled to appear in the December 1992 issue of *National Library of Australia News*.
2. Bob Sharman, 'More muddle than melodrama', in *Papers and Proceedings of the 7th Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists, Inc. Hobart 2-6 June 1989*. ASA, Hobart, 1991, p. 6.
3. In his 'Noel George Butlin, 1921-1991', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 19, no 2, November 1991, pp. 143-156.
4. Alan Ives, 'Ian Maclean: thirty years an archivist', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 6, no 2, February 1975, pp. 57-65.
5. H. L. White, *Trends in Archival Administration: A Paper presented to the Third Annual Conference of the Australian Institute of Librarians. Adelaide June 1940*, AIL, Canberra, 1944.

6. Ian Maclean, 'An Analysis of Jenkinson's 'Manual of Archive Administration' in the Light of Australian Experience' in A. E. Hollaender, ed., *Essays in memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, Chichester, 1962, pp. 128-152.
7. S. F. Bemis, 'The Training of Archivists in the United States', *American Archivist*, vol 2, no 3, July 1939, pp. 154-161.
8. i.e. The Commission on the Organisation of the Executive Branch of Government Task Force on Records Management led by Emmett J. Leahy. His report had been released in January 1949.
9. Australia. Parliament. *Report of the National Library Inquiry Committee 1956-1957*, Government Printer, Canberra, 1957. The Commonwealth Archives Committee's report appears as Appendix 3.