

Obituary

Margaret J. Jennings (1943–1993)

I

Margaret Jennings, President of the Australian Society of Archivists from 1979 to 1981, died in Queensland on Christmas Day 1993 after a brief illness. On Wednesday 12 January 1994 a Memorial Service was held at Trinity College Chapel at the University of Melbourne conducted by the College Chaplain, the Rev. Janet Gaden. Family, friends and colleagues attended to pay tribute to Margaret's life and work. A longstanding friend from college days, Anne Roberts, spoke of Margaret's personal qualities, while Andrew Lemon contributed the following commentary on her career.

When I was asked to say a few words about the professional career of Margaret Jennings I sat down and wrote a short piece which dutifully took us down the long path of her achievements. I looked at it this morning and decided that the piece was tedious and earnest. I was sure I could hear Margaret in her distinctive, slow, rich voice, always with the humorous or satirical edge, saying 'Come off it, Andrew. Don't lay it on with a trowel.' So it went into the rubbish bin, and what I have to say now is more succinct and I hope closer to the mark.

It's hard — indeed there is not much point — in trying to convince the non-believers, the non-practitioners, that Margaret's chosen field of employment for most of her working life — Archives and Records Management — is or can be an action-packed, creative life. I don't think it is too specious an analogy to say that most of the areas in which Margaret has worked have required the attributes of a bushfire fighter — the need to keep a cool head when there can be several emergencies to be dealt with at a time. Not one of her jobs was easy. Not one of her jobs was a sinecure. All the more remarkable then that Margaret always made a point of finding the time to involve herself heavily in professional development work, most of it in an honorary capacity.

Her first significant job after graduating from the University of Melbourne in 1964 was as a researcher and writer for the Hill of Content Publishing Company. From the start she was interested in the

challenge of research and of presenting material in a graphic and accessible way. The project there which most engaged her was a series of history kits designed for schoolchildren on familiar topics of Australian history such as Eureka or Ned Kelly; the most exciting part for Margaret was that the kits contained facsimiles of original, archival documents — the sort of thing which when carefully chosen breathes life into subjects which can so often be moribund for children.

From Hill of Content she joined Australian Archives in Brighton and worked there from 1970 to 1978, specialising in survey and disposal. Joining AA (as she liked to put it) was like joining a strange fraternity, a weird sect perhaps, with a small band of adherents around the country. Over the years Margaret became part of this network and established friendships with many Australian Archives archivists and Australian archivists, particularly in Canberra.

It was during this time that she fell hook, line and sinker for the Australian Society of Archivists, the first independent professional body for archivists which was formed in 1975. I suspect she had her friend and colleague Anne Green to blame for getting her so closely involved from the start. It was through the ASA that I and other harassed colleagues working at the Public Record Office of Victoria met up with and relished the friendship and support of Margaret and her fellow spirits at Brighton.

It so happens that just before last Christmas I was doing an overdue archives job on my own semi-chaotic filing system. There were the handwritten or typewritten notices and minutes of the first meetings of the Victorian Branch of the ASA — a group small enough to have our meetings at each others' houses. Margaret took over as Branch Secretary from Judith Cordingley in 1976. Naturally I remember the first time I went to a meeting at Carlisle Street, East Hawthorn. No-one had told me about Dido, the Great Dane. It was a pleasant surprise and a lasting memory to be met at the door by Dido and Margaret, almost at eye level.

Margaret had her arm twisted so vigorously in 1979 to stand for election as national President of the ASA that she took off like a helicopter. It was not an easy position to hold, but in her two-year term as President and in the subsequent two years in which she remained a Council member, the ASA developed from being a small and essentially amateur body into a solid and professional one. The Society owes much to Margaret's skills shown during that time.

She also played an important part in developing the first academic course in archives to be offered in Victoria, which was finally launched in 1985 as the Graduate Diploma in Information Management (Archives and Records) at the Melbourne College of Advanced Education. Margaret had moved to the University of Melbourne in



Margaret Jennings (third from left) during a working visit to Monash University, April 1990 with (from left) Angela Cauchi, Jenni Davidson and Elaine Byrne.

1978 to take on the demanding position of Records Manager, and she regularly lectured in the Archives and Records course.

That was not all: as Records Manager at Melbourne University she felt it necessary to play a role in the Records Management Association of Australia. Being Margaret, this had to be a constructive role. She served sentences on the RMAA as Victorian Branch editor and as a member of the Branch Council. As well she sought to broaden her own qualifications and undertook a Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies: this led her to an involvement with the establishment of the Chinese Australian Museum in Melbourne which benefited from her advice and her voluntary work as a Museum guide.

Since my dealings with Margaret mainly revolved around the Australian Society of Archivists, I am quite unqualified to speak in detail of her work at the University of Melbourne, or of her subsequent career moves to the University of Adelaide where she held the position of University Archivist and Records Manager from 1990 to 1992, or to Griffith University where she began working as Records Manager as recently as September 1992. I do know that she continued to earn the respect and admiration of her colleagues. She never stopped being actively involved with the Australian Society of Archivists, attending branch meetings and conferences, contributing **International Notes** to *Archives and Manuscripts*, and convening the special interest group of University and College Archivists in 1991.

I think the aspect of her work with the ASA which gave her the greatest pleasure was her involvement with the body called the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives, known as PARBICA to its friends. She first played a part in this body when she gave a paper to the Sydney Conference in 1985, and PARBICA activities took her to Port Moresby in 1987, Wellington in 1989 and American and Western Samoa in 1991: it also greatly increased the size of what we might call the Jennings network. Probably what appealed most, apart from the opportunity to travel in the Pacific, was the chance to educate and enthuse others. I feel that one of Margaret's greatest strengths was the quiet and consistent support and encouragement she gave to younger or less experienced members of her profession, wherever she went. Margaret gave a dignity to those who felt they lacked recognition or confidence in themselves.

Death is part of life: I have no trouble with that concept. But perhaps the hardest thing about coming to terms with death, and particularly with sudden death or untimely death, is to accept the disappearance of someone who has been a vital part of our lives. So it is with Margaret. To most of her friends and colleagues her death was unexpected, for just a few short months ago the helicopter was still flying — she was in full professional flight; and to all of us her death was untimely, as she had much, much more in life that she could and would have given.

I have given you only a glimpse of what Margaret Jennings meant to her friends and colleagues. I am aware it is inadequate. But Margaret was very fond of quoting a favourite wind-up phrase from the radio broadcaster Alastair Cooke's *Letter from America* — 'and the rest you know'.

Andrew Lemon

II

A significant period of Margaret Jennings' career was spent at the University of Melbourne where she held the position of Records Management Officer from 1978 to 1990. Barbara Reed, with assistance from Jenni Davidson and Kerry Gordon (all colleagues from University of Melbourne days), has compiled the following tribute to Margaret.

Margaret Jennings left Australian Archives to accept a newly defined role of Records Management Officer at the University of Melbourne in 1978, a post which she held until 1990. This newly established position was developed by Margaret into an in-house consultancy service to the University as a whole on the management of their records. She provided systems advice and implementation services to a large range

of 'clients' within the University, established a professional in-house microfilming bureau, provided efficient non-current records storage, undertook in-house training in records management and set up clearly defined and complementary spheres of activity with various other sections in the University. The position of Records Management Officer at the University became a model for many other professional programs throughout the country.

The role of Records Manager is never an easy one, fitting awkwardly at times into the spectrum of 'information professionals'. Margaret's success in this role is manifest, however, its continuance was not without constant need to fight for recognition of the role played within the University framework. Margaret's dogged vision of what she perceived her role to be in the University environment, what resources were necessary to achieve that vision, and where the responsibilities of others intersected with that role, were hard defended.

With her background in publishing, history and Australian Archives, Margaret possessed a sense of perspective on recordkeeping systems which was rare. She was quick to see the benefits and capacity of computers in the management of records, but was also very able to see through sales hype. It was Margaret, with her perspective on recordkeeping, who first was able to say in the early 1980s that some computerised records management systems were mechanising nineteenth century registration systems.

As a brash, reasonably raw and arrogant recruit to the Records Management program at Melbourne, I joined a line of distinguished archivists and records managers who have worked with and been trained by Margaret. It was always a thrill to be introduced as her colleague, rather than the truth, as her assistant, or junior. As a supervisor, Margaret was extremely generous in sharing her time and knowledge. She had the ability to train staff in a way that left people empowered and in full possession of dignity.

This personal characteristic of appreciating an individual was never more apparent than in her work with the participants of PARBICA meetings. These meetings were attended by representatives from various Pacific nations, with assorted international 'heavies' to 'tell them how it was done'. The presence and work of Margaret and Peter Orlovich at these meetings dispelled all pretention and allowed the participants to get down to the things that really mattered in a training environment.

It was in her work in the Pacific arena that Margaret's personal and professional interests coincided. An avid traveller in unlikely places and by unusual means, Margaret was always seeking to expand her personal knowledge of the Asia Pacific Region. In her role as International Contact person for the ASA and subsequently as editor of

International Notes in *Archives and Manuscripts*, Margaret focussed on seeking copy from all her contacts in the Region. The soliciting of copy for an Australian professional journal was not easy: first it had to be in English, or a translation had to be undertaken. How much to edit the English construction of people writing English as a second language was an issue constantly grappled with. Through her constant efforts in this area, Margaret assisted to inform us of activities and archival issues facing countries such as the Marshall Islands, Palau, Guam, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, China, and Brunei.

Margaret took great delight in people who were slightly eccentric, who had quirks, strong creative passions or who displayed verbal wit. However, along with such tolerance for the off-beat, was an absolute and unswerving standard of personal integrity. Inside an unassuming manner lurked a person of strong will and very well defined standards. One of my fondest recollections of Margaret is as the sole questioner of the annual accounts presented at RMAA meetings, where against a sea of disapproval Margaret would every year try to probe expenditure and income figures.

Margaret's professional life outside the University was full, with office or editing commitments of the ASA and the ACA occupying a proportion of her leisure time for eleven of her last fifteen years. During that time she undertook the role of Convenor of the University and College Special Interest Group of the ASA and was, at the time of her death, a member of the ACA Executive. She was involved with the development of the first teaching curriculum for the Graduate Diploma in Information Management (Archives and Records) at the then Melbourne CAE and subsequently taught in the first years of the course. In addition, Margaret was on various committees of the Victorian Branch of the Records Management Association of Australia for a number of years.

Margaret's interests did not purely lie on the professional side of life. Rather she enjoyed nothing more than an Indian meal, a fine piano concert by Geoffrey Tozer, the art gallery, museums and the company of family and friends. In fact the attraction of art galleries and museums was so strong it impelled her to undertake a Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies completed in 1987. Her house, its restoration, repair and the garden which was never to be subdued, also took her energies.

In 1990, Margaret made a significant break when she left the University of Melbourne and relocated to Adelaide, to assume the post of University Archivist and Records Manager at the University of Adelaide. It seemed to be a lateral move in her desire for the warmth of the tropics, but the cultural attractions of the city of Adelaide were obvious. A further move to the position of Records Manager at Griffith

University brought Margaret one step closer to her beloved tropical North.

Margaret's professional career, her abiding commitment to the profession she had chosen, and her constant willingness to take on new ideas and new challenges, makes her untimely death more poignant. She will be missed by all her professional colleagues, but especially by those who were lucky enough to work with her and to be infected by her professional enthusiasm.

Barbara Reed