



Fabian Hutchinson, Canberra, Winter 1993. Photo: Jonathan Wraith.

Fabian Hutchinson, 1950–1994

Obituary compiled by Greg Coleman

Fabian Hutchinson died in Darwin on Sunday 31 July 1994 due to respiratory illness. Fabian had been visiting Darwin from his base at the Central Land Council in Alice Springs. A funeral service was held on Friday 5 August in Darwin, and his remains were returned to his family in his home state of Tasmania.

The following pages are dedicated to obituaries from some of Fabian's friends and colleagues.

1. A friend and colleague of Fabian's since the 1970s, John Thompson writes about his character and various professional interests during that time.
2. During 1992–93, Fabian devoted much of his professional activity to the National AIDS Archive Collection project. Two of his colleagues and friends working with the Archives of Business and Labour in Canberra, Ewan Maidment and Jonathan Wraith, make various observations about Fabian and his work.
3. Since 1991, Fabian had been involved in the Central Australian Archive Project and worked with the Central Land Council. Colleague and friend Vivienne Larking, together with other friends from Alice Springs, writes about Fabian and his pursuits during this time.

AS I REMEMBER IT, MY FIRST MEETING WITH Fabian Hutchinson took place in 1978 or 1979. The place was Melbourne and Fabian was completing his Bachelor of Arts degree in the Department of History in the University of Melbourne (he gained First Class Honours in 1979). I was at that time employed at the State Library of Victoria where I held the position of Manuscripts Librarian in the La Trobe Collection. Fabian appeared unexpectedly in my office one day to engage me in a detailed conversation about archival materials and the special nature and character of personal papers within this broader category. That conversation was lively, wide-ranging and very stimulating. I was left in no doubt that a person of unusual abilities and presence had entered my life. Fabian engaged my attention at once with his sharp intellect, his urbanity, and the sheer sweep of his interest

in history, literature, politics, the visual arts, music and the arcane and esoteric areas of magic and witchcraft about which I personally knew little.

Fabian's presence was extraordinary. Despite his tiny frame and a sense of physical fragility, he radiated a remarkable strength, determination and energy. Over the years, that presence changed little. Fabian always looked much the same. His style was casual, informal, a bit unkempt. But it was a style all of his own and his consistency in these matters reflected his qualities of high intelligence and rigour which were his particular hallmarks during the twenty years or so in which it was my pleasure and privilege to know him.

At that original meeting, Fabian came to see me recommended by Professor Greg Denning, that great teacher and distinguished historian of the Pacific and of the cultural contact between peoples. With Greg's encouragement, Fabian was preparing for his postgraduation career. His attention and enthusiasm, fanned by Denning, had turned to the raw materials of history and to the problems of the collection, organisation, control and use of archival materials and personal papers. He had it in mind to undertake archival studies at the University of London and sought first my advice and then, later, my help in writing a letter of introduction which could assist him gain entry to the London program. I also provided him with a letter of introduction to Graeme Powell who was at that time working for the National Library of Australia and the State Library of New South Wales as the Australian Joint Copying Project Officer in London. Occasionally I received cards and brief messages from Fabian who had clearly embraced the archives profession with the abundant enthusiasm he brought to all his other interests.

In December 1979, I left Melbourne to live in Canberra and to work in the National Library of Australia. By the early 1980s, Fabian was back in Australia and engaged in the first of a number of archival commissions which took him from freelancing into permanent employment in 1983 as the Foundation Archivist of Deakin University and then, in 1984, to the position of Research-Bibliographer in the University of Melbourne. Over the years, Fabian would seek my advice and encouragement and occasionally more direct support in the form of a reference or a letter of introduction. Sometimes I encountered him at workshops and seminars—in Sydney at a joint Australian Society of Archivists/Records Management Association of Australia seminar on electronic records, in Darwin at the Records Management Association of Australia 8th National Convention (1991) and more recently in Canberra (1993) at the seminar on Alfred Deakin arranged by the National Library. On these occasions, Fabian was a lively and critical presence and could always be relied upon to open debate or to extend and enrich the argument of professional dialogue.

During these years, I also encountered Fabian in more formal situations. In the late 1980s he applied for the position of Executive Officer in the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau in succession to the redoubtable Robert Langdon. I was a member of the panel which interviewed Fabian. Sadly his application on that occasion did not succeed but he offered tremendous value intellectually and charmed the panel with his erudition and his fundamental enthusiasm for the job he was seeking. Later, he carried out a consultancy for the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau working for a few weeks in Tonga. This assignment was not a success, due it must be said to no failure on Fabian's part. The task was intrinsically difficult and, with the benefit of hindsight, constructed to fail. Fabian discharged his responsibilities with impressive diligence and the high level of professional commitment he brought to all his work. In December 1991, I was pleased to support his successful application to work with the AIDS Education Project at the Australian National University in Canberra.

During his stay in Canberra, I would have occasional dinners with Fabian. Our choice was always for Indian food which he loved and which he enjoyed as a manifestation of the rich culture of India which he knew so well as a scholar and a traveller. Conversation at dinner with Fabian was always a challenge. It ranged widely and it probed and judged as Fabian relentlessly sought information and as relentlessly weighed it and subjected it to a rigorous intellectual scrutiny. He continued his personal interest in the archival affairs of the Pacific and was astute in his criticism and evaluation of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau which he believed was in need of an overhaul. At these dinners too, I gained a new appreciation of Fabian's warmth and charm and of his considerable affection and regard for a wide range of people. His life was, I think, a passionate one both professionally and in more personal and intimate ways. Occasionally, he shared some part of his private life with me in conversations which as of old ranged widely and deeply.

Three weeks before his untimely death in Darwin, we lunched together in Canberra. The lunch itself was prosaic snatched quickly between appointments on a busy day for us both. Instead of the Indian food we had promised each other, we met over sandwiches and coffee in the cafeteria of the National Library. The talk that day was only briefly about our shared archival interests. It then moved to more personal matters and to details of Fabian's early life and education in Tasmania, to his family and to his genealogical link to Thomas Hutchinson (1711–1780), Royal Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in America from 1771 until the debacle of the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Fabian also spoke of his special friendship with

Eliza Hill. As always in the past, I was left with a sense of a passionate and committed man—civilised, warm, graceful—and of a richly fulfilled human being. Then he was gone.

John Thompson

Fabian's connections with the archival world were very wide and his death leaves great gaps in the networks of archivists. His genial manner, impish delight in stirring the pot, his wry smile and wonderful voice are lost, but his work was programmatic and its influence will be felt for some time to come.

The strength of Fabian's influence was partly generated by his broad interests. Frank Strahan has pointed to Fabian's interests in the development, shape and colour of Australian history across the board for Aboriginals, education, health, business, trade unions, science and technology. Add to this his international interests in the archives of the Pacific Islands and India, and in Australian relations with India. These broad interests complemented his nomadic way of life and in pursuing them he made contact with a great range of people and created links between them. Given the opportunity, he could perform an Indian rope trick of giving inspiration to people he met and generating ideas and action out of the encounter.

The inspiration to archivists was not just the breadth of his work, but the theoretical lines he took on it. Fabian did not have a Jenkinsonian concern with establishing the authenticity of the archives and securing them, nor the loyalty of St Lawrence, dying at the griddle in defence of the records. He dealt with community records which engendered reactions and which can be used for agitation. Hence his invention of the Activist Archivists Association (AAA).

Where authentic discourses had been captured and strategically isolated, Fabian argued for the relocation of the records within the social practices from which they had been isolated. He was interested in the location of discourses within social practices which give them political and social vitality, a line which he developed from Walter Benjamin (although there is something Jenkinsonian about the determination to locate archives in their provenance). The object of Fabian's program is not to establish legal authenticity, but to empower the producers of the records. To provide 'organisations with a workable concept of archival procedure (the record continuum stuff) by a teasing out the valuable from the dross is far preferable to carting records away by the truck load to sit in the bowels of the earth'. (Fabian Hutchinson)

& Jonathan Wraith, 'The National AIDS Archives Collection', *Limited Addition*, No. 3, Oct. 1993, p. 29.)

Fabian was interested in records on the peripheries of society. He did not have a disregard for official records at the centre of things, but a passion for archives in the front line: India, the Pacific, Aboriginal, AIDS. Of sex workers' organisations he wrote: 'Rather than stopping at the items of "national" significance... we also made some effort to document activities that seemed to us to be of "unique" significance in this field, even though they were based in very specific State (and local) contexts.' (*ibid.*, p. 27)

His conception of the potential for change in the archival profession became focused on the development of archival skills and facilities among Aboriginal organisations. Fabian took a prominent role in the ASA Conference on the archives of indigenous peoples, held at Townsville in May this year, reporting to the Central Land Council that 'the profession, through its conferences at least, is starting to pay some regard to programs for Aboriginal archives, and is prepared to listen to Aboriginal viewpoints and requests for more appropriate treatment'. His contributions at the ASA Conference were aimed at developing appropriate forms of training for Aboriginal organisations requiring archives programs, and 'to ensure that the Archives profession (and other related information professions) pay sufficient heed to alternative forms of safe keeping that some of these culturally-grounded organisations are already developing'. (Fabian Hutchinson, *Archives & Oral History Conference Report*, May 1994, p. 9.)

Deploying his communication talents, Fabian assumed the role of educator, building new networks of archivists and librarians and enabling them to have a clear understanding of the potential for change in their professions. He saw archives as a conservative profession by nature — 'it focuses on preserving an unbroken line of custody over the records of Government Departments or other creating bodies, and the Archivist is not encouraged to inquire too deeply into the 'contents' of the records, once they have been selected for preservation; nor have archivists been very much engaged in issues of social justice, or in recovering archival sources for active use by dispossessed peoples—even where their own history is "captured" in state controlled record series.' (*ibid.*)

Fabian had been on the cutting edge of redefinition of the social possibilities of archival management. A new program is being enunciated out of new understandings of the functions of non-official discourse in producing changes in society and in protecting and preserving social and environmental interests of the various communities which comprise society. The implications for the management of archival institutions are already manifest in relation to access

to Aboriginal archives; the implications for decentralised management of archives by the people and organisations which produce them, their relocation into an active social context, are only now beginning to be explored.

Jonathan Wraith & Ewan Maidment

The Central Australian Archive Project (CAAP) members and the Central Land Council staff knew Fabian Hutchinson since 1991. He was employed as the Information Services Supervisor of the Central Land Council in Alice Springs between 1991 and 1992. From 1994 until his death Fabian was the Central Land Council archivist. However he did not see his role in Central Australia as just archiving one organisation's records. He had a wider vision involving the archival and Keeping Place needs of all Aboriginal organisations.

Fabian initiated the Central Australian Archives Project. Its purpose was to archive the records of four Aboriginal organisations: Yipirinya School, Tangentyere Council, Central Land Council and the Institute of Aboriginal Development. This was a one year funded project of the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

This project became the Central Australian Aboriginal Archive Project. The initial project which was funded by AIATSIS did not provide funding for training of Aboriginal people in archives administration. Fabian believed that this matter should be addressed and was working towards setting up a Certificate in Information Studies course which was aimed specifically at training local Aboriginal people in the management of information. This course he believed was 'breaking new ground' as there were specific components relating to Keeping Places and Aboriginal Archives.

Fabian realised that the Central Australian Aboriginal Archives were a very valuable historical collection and he recognised the urgency of maintaining archival control and preservation of these records.

To those who worked with him and shared his knowledge we realised that his professional objectives working within Aboriginal organisations was twofold: to get the job done and to develop an intellectual questioning of the archival profession's responsibilities towards indigenous records. He instilled a sense of questioning about the role of the archivist within Aboriginal Australia and broadened people's knowledge about indigenous control of cultural property.

We all feel a sense of loss about Fabian's passing both as a person and because of the knowledge he shared so generously with us all in Central Australia and nationally. As a friend, we mourn his passing because he was a true friend and a generous spirit.

Vivienne Larking