Ian Maclean: Australian Archivist (1919–2003)

Ian Maclean, the founding Chief Archivist of what became the National Archives of Australia, died in Brisbane, at the Greenslopes Hospital on 26 February 2003, at the age of 83.

Ian Maclean was in effect the founder of the Australian Government's archives system, having been released from the Australian Army during the later stages of World War II (in 1944) to take up duties as the first Chief Archives Officer of the Archives Division of the Parliamentary Library (in effect the Commonwealth National Library). The Archives Division developed into the Commonwealth Archives Office when it was separated from the National Library in 1961 and, after the passing of the Archives Act, 1983, became the Australian Archives, and later the National Archives of Australia.

Throughout the formative years of the Archives Office, Maclean was its leader, and he provided intellectual and organisational direction. In doing so, he also provided leadership for the whole of the archival profession in Australia.

He was at his best in expressing his ideas and developing theories in articles written for some of the world's leading publications in archives. Particular attention should be given to his ideas expressed in "Australian experience in record and archive management" published in the *American Archivist* in October 1959, and his contribution to a festschrift in honour of the English archivist, Sir Hilary Jenkinson, in 1962 ("An analysis of Jenkinson's 'Manual' in the light of Australian experience" in *Essays in memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* . London, Society of Archivists). Ian Maclean belonged to the classical tradition of Australian archivists, whose theories have been based on work done in Great Britain. He had been able to maintain this faithfulness to the English model despite the ways in which he had benefited from the methods which American archivists have used in their work, from American writings and, in particular, from the visit to Australia of the outstanding American Archivist, T.R. Schellenberg (in 1954 – a visit in the organising of which Maclean took a leading part).

Remarkably, these ideas of Maclean's, expressed in the 1950s and 1960s have great relevance to work in archival theory being presented in Australia today. In the 1990s, in the publication *Debates and Discourses selected Australian writings on archival theory 1951 to 1990* (Canberra, the ASA,1950) , both these articles were included.

Australia's problems in arranging and organising public archives (especially in the 1950s and 1960s) were complicated by the fact that, as a nation state, it was scarcely

half a century old: at the same time, those fifty years of its history as a nation had produced a baffling profusion of governmental arrangements. Few nations in the Western world had had more administrative changes in its national system of government. This made the arrangement and description of records emanating from those departments an extremely difficult business. Ian Maclean can be credited with having led the thinking of Australian archivists in coming to grips with these problems. To-day, when archivists throughout the world look to problems relating to arrangement and description of records, preservation of files (including electronic records), seeking approval for the resources of the nation to be utilised in research and making material available for scholars to use it, they find that the theories developed under Maclean's guidance in the Commonwealth Archives Office are still relevant.

In 1968 Maclean left the service of the Australian Government, on secondment, to the Secretariat-General's office of SEATO, in which he remained until early in 1974. He returned to Canberra, and for a few months was Acting Director of the Commonwealth Archives. But he left that post, and took up duties as Assistant Keeper of the Public Record Office of Victoria (his home State). In 1976 he became Principal Archivist of the Archives Authority of New South Wales, and he retired in 1980. Maclean's later years in office were clouded by personal problems (his marriage was dissolved) and ill-health. His best work was done in the earlier years.

During retirement, he gained a research fellowship with the War Memorial to edit *A Guide to the personal papers of Gavin Long*, and he stayed on in Canberra for a few years where he worked as a consultant in archives and historical studies to the Department of Defence.

Maclean was awarded Honorary Membership of the Australian Society of Archivists – an honour conferred on him because he had given brilliant intellectual leadership to the Commonwealth Archives Office during the formative years of the national archival body. The Australian Archives celebrated the 50th anniversary of its founding in a festschrift titled *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives first fifty years* (1994). He was present at the launching. He was awarded Membership in the Order of Australia (AM) in 1996 for his service in the inauguration of the Commonwealth Records Series system.

He leaves two sons (James and Roderick) and a daughter (Anne).

Bob Sharman
May 2003

I would like to complement Bob Sharman's obituary for Ian Maclean by, firstly, providing some more personal information about him and, secondly, reflecting a little further on his contribution to archives and records management practice in Australia. Ian was my uncle — it was his encouragement and example that caused me to consider archives as a career — so his death has been a personal loss for me, as well as a professional one.

Ian was born in New Zealand, the eldest of five children of the Reverend Hector Maclean and his wife Agnes. The family moved to Australia when Ian was eight years old, with his father's appointment as Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew in the Theological Hall at the University of Melbourne. They lived in the grounds of Ormond College and, as his surviving brothers, Hector and Donald, recall, it was a happy family home. It was also an intellectually stimulating environment, with frequent visits by students of the College and lively discussions and debate — Ian's father, in the conservative Melbourne of the 1930s, was known as "the Red Professor" for his progressive views.

After schooling in the Rural Training School at the University's Teachers College (also a stimulating environment, with children of a range of ages learning together) and at Scotch College, Ian obtained his B.A.(Hons), majoring in history, at the University of Melbourne. While, like his siblings, he was academically strong, he also enjoyed and excelled at sport, gaining a Half-blues in Rugby Union at the University. Over time, his physical toughness became more a resilience, which helped him to retain and renew his zest for life while dealing with long-term and debilitating illness during his later years.

Ian's keen interest in music and theatre, apparent from an early age, was an important part of his life. He was active in the Canberra Repertory Society, performing in or directing many of its plays during his time there. This interest also provided a focus for his involvement in the ex-pat community in Bangkok, where he directed a production of "The Importance of Being Ernest". Ian loved choral music and sang in choirs wherever he lived. He was also fond of Gilbert and Sullivan: my early discussions with him about electronic records were often punctuated with a rousing chorus of 'It is the very model of a modern Data General'.

Bob Sharman has reviewed the intellectual and organisational leadership that Ian provided to the archival profession in Australia during its formative years. Ian also recognised that he and the profession had a great deal to learn, as we still do. One of the achievements of which he was most proud was being awarded a Commonwealth Government Travelling Scholarship in 1958 to visit the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Germany and France. He considered this study tour immensely important, as a (then) rare opportunity to

inject knowledge and experience from these long-established archival traditions into Australia's developing professional practice.

Perhaps it was because Ian was so conscious of the problems of developing a national archives system in (relative) professional isolation that he served enthusiastically as a consultant on archives for UNESCO in developing countries in Africa, South-East Asia and the Pacific during the 1970s as his active career was drawing to a close. This was also part of Ian's lifelong interest in professional education and training.

In an obituary prepared for the *Informaa Quarterly*, I have noted in more detail than is possible here Ian's contribution to Australian records management. While, as Bob has noted, Ian and his colleagues in the Archives Division were developing means to address the problems of modern public archives, they were also working with departments to improve their records management.

Most farsighted among these initiatives was the establishment of a network of "departmental registrars" in charge of each department's records management. Characteristically, this was supported by a training scheme, developed by the Archives Division and the Public Service Board and launched in 1958. It was this country's first systematic scheme for providing technical training for records managers. The depth of Ian's knowledge of the theory and practical workings of registry systems and other aspects of public sector records management of the time is well illustrated in the article "Australian experience in record and archive management" to which Bob refers (despite the omission of ten pages of perhaps excessive detail from the *Debates & Discourses* reprint).

Ian regarded the archives and records management program that he and his colleagues developed for the Commonwealth Government in the 1950s as one of "comprehensive public records administration", something which many Australian jurisdictions have only begun to achieve, or return to, in recent years. He considered archives and records management as the one profession – again a farsighted view – and urged members of both groups to work together to raise professional standing.

One of Ian's three children remarked recently that it was only the obituaries regarding his professional life that had shown them how much he had achieved as an archivist. To them he was a loving father with whom they shared many joyful experiences. For us as archivists, Ian Maclean's passing is an opportunity to remind ourselves of what is possible in a full professional life.

David Roberts
May 2003