

Frank Strahan (1930–2003)



This is an expanded version of a eulogy read at a memorial gathering for Frank Strahan on 26 November 2003. Further tributes have also been published in the University of Melbourne Archives Bulletin No. 14, March 2004.

Frank Strahan was born on 17 November 1930 at Wonthaggi, Victoria, where his education commenced before he left, aged five, with his family for Albury. There his father, FA (Tony) ran Strahan's Corner Store, combining grocery, café, billiard saloon and dance hall, but got into financial difficulties and in 1939 left his Scottish-born wife, Laura, to bring up two boys and a girl. Charming and energetic, she worked as a successful saleswoman there and later in San Francisco.

Frank attended the Albury primary school (where this left-hander was forced to write with his right to his own frustration and, much later, the despair of many a secretary), the high school, and finished his secondary education as dux at the Albury Grammar School in 1947. Though disappointed to find that a hoped-for scholarship to the University of Sydney was unavailable that year, he found a mentor in history master Edgar French, who was about to leave to become a PhD candidate, and soon a member of staff, in the Melbourne Faculty of Education. French enrolled him at the Associated Teachers Training Institute (Mercer House), established for those intending to become primary teachers in private schools, and when after a year this did not answer, put him in the way of a job in the University's Students Records. As a student teacher he had enrolled for University English but been excluded from the examination through ignorance of the entry regulations and lack of funds to pay the late fee. Now he had three hours off per week for lectures and tutorials and his course fees repaid on passing. He

transferred to History Honours in 1953, became Secretary and President of the Students' Historical Society and finished as a full-time student, graduating March 1956. Pointers to his future were his enjoyment of a student record-hunting expedition in the Victorian Western district, led by AG Serle; and, under the latter's supervision, the topic selected for his fourth year thesis: The Growth and Extent of Company Mining on the Victorian Goldfields in the 1850s.

On graduation he proceeded to a year's internship at the Commonwealth National Library, then led by Harold White, working in the Divisions of Australiana and the Commonwealth Archives and drafted into a course leading to the Preliminary Certificate in librarianship. He returned to Melbourne as a research student in History. He did not complete the project then started, on Victorian newspapers, but was later entirely generous in making the bibliographical information he had gathered available to others.

Meanwhile, among the encouraging archival developments of the war and postwar period, which had resulted in the appointment of an archivist for the Commonwealth and Victorian official records respectively, was an increasing interest in business and University records. Noel G Butlin was by 1954 assembling for his research in Economic History at the Australian National University records soon to form the nucleus of the Archives now named for him; and in October that year, after the arrival of the University of Sydney's first University Archivist, David MacMillan, an economic historian Dr Alan Birch, had gathered Sydney academics and businessmen to form the Business Archives Council of Australia. A Victorian Branch appeared in 1957, led by W Woodruff, Professor of Economic History, and after a preliminary survey of businesses in 1958 to enquire what records they might hold, employed Frank Strahan in July 1959 to follow this up with another, more detailed survey. His salary, like that of the previous survey officer, was funded by Harold White (as a member of the BAC looking to his Library's interests in the matter), and he was formally attached to Professor Woodruff's Economic History Department at the University of Melbourne but also occupied a carrel in the new Baillieu Library. He commenced his vigorous pursuit of Victorian business records and, like MacMillan, was soon collecting them on behalf of the BAC. His first trophies included correspondence and mortgage books of the AMP Society in Melbourne from the late 1860s and builder Clements Langford Pty Ltd's job files.

When the University resolved to follow Sydney's example and appoint an Archivist, Frank's success in the survey was seen to make him the obvious candidate. The decision to create the post followed on the one hand the BAC's negotiations, at first through the Library Committee, then with the sympathetic and archivally well-informed Vice-Chancellor GW Paton, and on the other the interest roused within the University in its own records. In 1957 GN Blainey had in his *Centenary History of the University of Melbourne* emphasised their historical value; and Edgar French – again helpful in what would become Frank's cause – expressed his concern for their better organisation and suggested that the University of Sydney be approached for information concerning its archivist's terms and duties. The result was a University Archivist who, having responsibilities towards University records, was required also to cooperate in the BAC's activities and look after the records gathered. Frank took up the appointment on 29 June 1960.

Within two years the archives had moved twice from its birthplace in the Baillieu Library. The Archives soon held, apart from some very early records of the University, records of solicitors Blake & Riggall including papers of the Chaffey Brothers, the records of early Melbourne merchant and agent James Graham, the varied collection of EJ Semmens relating to the Creswick district, records of pastoral companies Young Bros and Dennys Lascelles, and much else. Insurance, real estate, brewing, retailing and wholesaling, engineering, machinery manufacturing and shipping were among the business categories represented in collections from these early years. Many moves had to be made, usually to buildings incorporating improved features, to accommodate the ever-growing business, University-related and (from 1973) trade union and other labour history holdings which grew to about 11 kilometres in Frank's time.

During most of the 1970s Frank was also concerned with the affairs of the Percy Grainger Museum at the University. An active participant in the discussions, commencing in 1972, which led to this languishing institution becoming the centre of research and public interest its founder had envisaged, he reported on its staffing and other needs, visited the Grainger interests in New York, and from July 1974, when Dr Kay Dreyfus was appointed Archivist, became for some years responsible for its administration.

It was his collecting ability which particularly struck observers. When the Archives published its *Guide to Collections* in 1983, Stuart Macintyre's tribute memorably enumerated the qualities required in an archivist and united in this one: the instincts of the magpie, the appetite of a goat, persuasiveness, the cultivation of a network of 'spotters', the steadfastness of a zealot in a sea of indifference. It was 'a happy conjunction of the right man at the right time'. Twelve years later in his review of the Archives Paul Brunton judged the Archives to be of 'national significance', and it was at Brunton's suggestion that the Australian Society of Archivists awarded Frank a Fellowship for his work in forming this collection.

Of course, more was needed to maintain the growth of the Archives over 35 years. Though beginning with support within both the University and the business community, the Archives' case had always to be reargued as personnel and institutional circumstances changed. He was prone to judge people by the level of their support for the Archives; and not a few were found wanting over this period. Nevertheless, there were always enough people already predisposed by their own strong interest in at least some aspect of the cause which drove him, or were brought to share a sense of the importance of his mission, or simply came to admire his commitment and achievement, to ensure that the Archives would flourish to the end of his active association with it into the present, where it thrives under his successor.

To be valued archives must be made known and found useful. A natural publicist, Frank delighted in exhibitions, demonstrating a particular flair in their organisation. Already as a student he had organised one on early Melbourne for the Historical Society in conjunction with the University's Centenary Fair, appearing in a press photograph wearing blazer and straw boater, balancing on a pennyfarthing borrowed for the occasion. With a growing collection of archives which included some evocative objects at his disposal (a 'lusty digger's pick', a nineteenth-century patent calculator and a Victorian glove stretcher were among the earliest items gathered up to 'dress up' the records on such occasions), large exhibitions (a few filling Wilson Hall) and smaller displays became a regular way of reaching the University and outside community and reassuring depositors of the enduring interest of their papers. Advertising arrangements for such events were not left to drift along official channels but taken in hand personally, with great success. The University came to look to the Archives to provide displays for

open days and other events. He spoke to students, outside groups and individuals about collections which might be of use to them and from the beginning set a high standard of service. He wrote a useful, promotional booklet, *Business Records: Their Management and Value* (1967) which appeared with the BAC's imprint, wrote articles and did research, drafting or editing of works by others. In particular he assisted the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as a contributor from 1967 until 2002 of entries on individuals represented in the collections, as supplier of archival material for use by other contributors, and as a member of its Victorian Committee for many years. Its medal for long and distinguished service was posthumously awarded to him.

Frank's single-mindedness in promoting his Archives was recognised by the supportive and the less so. He was competitive, combative, and astute; a possible threat to the Archives perceived on the horizon being met with prompt evasive action or, if necessary, defence, which whether successful or not, was always fearless. For the staff he created a stimulating setting in which to develop.

He saw the introduction of computers for functions other than word-processing as inevitable, entering into discussions about it in the early 1980s, but never mastering this innovation. Otherwise, he had remained up-to-date with archival affairs. Had the building he had taken a major part in planning for the Archives in the 1960s actually been built, its standards would have stood up quite well against those of the purpose-built repositories of recent years. His notes of a fact-finding trip to Sydney and Canberra in 1960 include a brief observation on current thinking on conservation; he urged the microfilming of major University records series many years before this was actually done; welcomed the appearance of trained conservators in the 1970s and in 1975 included a 'document repair specialist' in a submission for funds; he took a prominent part in discussions which finally led to the establishment of the University's Conservation Centre. He pressed for the appointment of a University Records Manager from the early 1970s.

Frank's great love for Australia and its history was not only expressed through the Archives. A foundation member of the National Trust, formed in 1956, he joined what was to become its Buildings Committee in 1960, serving on it until his death. In those early years he also ran a Research Auxiliary where members read papers and took excursions to buildings of interest. He contributed chapters to Trust publications, and

being a skilled photographer, illustrations as well to its *Historic Buildings of Victoria* (1966). He was associated with building preservation in a practical way at Beechworth, for which he had special affection. There he led parties to restore the Powder Magazine, which was handed over to the National Trust and opened to the public in 1966; and as a private venture, gathered together a syndicate of friends to buy and partially restore the de-licensed London Tavern for use as a holiday house. In recognition of his services the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) elected him an Honorary Member in 1995.

Carlton and its environs, and the terrace houses he occupied there, satisfied his taste and convenience. He was a founding and very active member of the Carlton Association when it formed in 1969 to conduct campaigns to preserve the area, including the prevention of further destruction of its characteristic housing in the name of 'slum clearance'. He loved good Australian craftsmanship, old and new, and some 19th and early 20th century pieces of furniture which found their way into the Archives were used to show off the numerous objects, usually associated with archival collections, which adorned his office to intrigue the visitor.

In Carlton also was his football team, whose exploits he celebrated weekly for two decades as 'Wacker' of the *Melbourne Times* in a distinctive argot conveying mood if not meaning. On his 'Awards' night at a local hotel, the most successful received a fine trophy produced by silversmith Steven Walsh; the remainder, gifts 'Wacker' had solicited from Carlton shopkeepers.

The difficulties brought about, especially in his later years, by a too great fondness for red wine, were apparent to all; they exasperated and saddened the many holding him in affectionate regard, and brought him much anxiety. From his thirties he had also to contend with increasing deafness, later a severe affliction. But this complex personality leaves us with much to recall with pleasure and admiration. Apart from those qualities enabling him to contribute so much to the community were others evident in day-to-day contact: a rich and distinctive vein of humour; a strong streak of fatalism; broad shoulders to carry or, if appropriate, shrug off, what others might unthinkingly lay on them; and his commitment to the integrity of the record, whatever it might say, even about him.

Frank died suddenly at his home on 18 November 2003. He is survived by his three sons.

Cecily Close

Frank Strahan: Beginnings

Formative influences and early regional collecting trips

Frank's early years in his birthplace Wonthaggi gave him a natural familiarity with mining, though it would not be coal, but the noble and base metals of fields in other parts of Victoria, in outback New South Wales, and in the West that would spark his imagination and lead to the acquisition of the great Broken Hill and Western Mining collections in the University of Melbourne Archives.

His blood ties with the Fifeshire men and women who came to Wonthaggi, and his later knowledge of the financing from London of so many Australian company operations, bred a lifelong affinity with both Scotland and his homeland against their common enemy, the English. It is ironic that in this formative part of his life, his mother's strong improving impulse left Frank - the elocution competitor in local eisteddfods - with a speaking voice that was more educated English than pit Scots or working class bush Australian.

The family move to Albury brought some radical changes - in environment, from working class mining and union town in the Depression to a relatively prosperous river centre servicing a rich pastoral hinterland (which already supported extensive infrastructure associated with the Hume Reservoir and would see even more with the decentralisation of industries associated with Defence and the war effort). After the move there was also a switch from government school to private school (where he had later Melbourne academic education historian Edgar French as a kind of mentor, but also felt the influence of the pacifist, expelled-Communist polemicist and historian James Normington Rawling).

Above all, his father's abandonment of his family (absconding from creditors, ostensibly to enlist, though there is no service record in his

name) when Frank was at a critical stage of his boyhood caused a wound which in the end, despite his best efforts, proved to be unhealable. It is tempting to think that Frank's professional collecting and preserving impulse was partly a reparative response to this event. It must also have thrust Frank, as the eldest boy, into a more responsible role, helping his mother and siblings to maintain the functioning of the family's corner store and dance hall. This not only deepened Frank's admiration for his mother's Scots resilience; but also gave him a familiarity with a gamut of business procedures, from stock control and book-keeping, to serving and selling, both person-to-person over the counter, and by means of moderately elaborate and changing window displays.

This would stand Frank in good stead: the experience drawn from this microcosm enabling him later, as survey officer with the Business Archives Council and then as University archivist, to treat with business people in terms that showed them he knew what he was talking about, just as it gave him a gift of salesmanship, and a flair for display which he would employ in Archives exhibitions on varied themes in many a different venue. Similarly, the pastoral town upbringing, and a brief spell of casual work at 'Brocklesby' (where Roberts had painted 'Shearing the Rams') gave him the background to smooth later dealings with graziers, cockies and stock and station agents whose records he sought to acquire.

His secondary schooling completed, he was the classic boy from the bush, ready to prove that he could take on the city – or the world, if need be. Indeed, within a few short years, the young man from Wonthaggi and another coal town product – Noel Butlin from Singleton – would effectively euchre the wily and experienced Harold White, and secure the business archives sector to their universities at the expense of the National Library. Butlin understood the combined clout of Australia's national flagship research university and its second oldest-established state counterpart against the relatively new Commonwealth body, itself also in the throes of relinquishing its official Archives division to an autonomous existence. These two boys from the bush shared several qualities: a passion for history and a desire to preserve sources which would enable the documentation of – among other things – the negative as well as positive aspects of Old World capital formation and its settler representatives in the New; they were decided about the demarcation between archives and libraries; they had a pretty clear idea

of what they wanted, and the political finesse to generally achieve it without prolonged resistance.

So it was that Edgar French enrolled Frank at the private school teacher training college in Melbourne, whence he would transfer to the University to pursue a History degree, Edgar French again finding him a job to support his studies, this time in the Student Records section of the Registrar's branch at the University. Thus there is an element of near-symmetry in Frank Strahan's more than half-century association with the archives of the University of Melbourne. His working association with the University from c.1949 – some decade before the establishment of the Archives – was in the field of records creation and management, handling material which would later become an important element of the archival record.

Having thus acted for the *creator* of archives, in 1960 he became *custodian*, and for the eight years after his retirement in 1995 until his death in 2003 his relationship was that of researcher or *user*. He continued to work towards publications based on material in the Archives, in particular a series of entries for later volumes of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.¹

When he became Archivist, Frank set about seeking collections of non-University records throughout Melbourne and regional Victoria, both business and 'private' (ie personal) papers. The 'Canberra conference' of November 1960 had divided up Melbourne target companies (interestingly, Frank supplied Vice-Chancellor Paton with a document showing which companies on the ANU list had already been approached by UMA, and they comprised 43% of the total). As well as this target area, Frank's personal familiarity with regional areas (including Geelong during a teaching stint while training at Mercer House, and Gippsland while compiling a commissioned history with Clive Disher at Strathfieldsaye), together with his experience in the field with Geoff Serle's country record survey parties while a student (themselves based on earlier work by Max Crawford and Gwyn James), his awareness of Butlin's interest in the pastoral industry and his observation of ANU Archives' acquisition of records with extensive coverage of the Hunter and Riverina regions – all these things served to send him out and about across country Victoria.

Indeed his trip to the 'Canberra conference' had included a third visit for that half-year to Benalla following up leads, and a five-day stint in

the familiar streets of Albury, sorting and packing for delivery to the Archives the records of Younghusband Ltd's oldest and most important branch, attempting to secure the records of Mate's department store, and getting an interview in the *Border Morning Mail*.

From the start of his time as University Archivist, he took a holistic and inclusive view of his role which extended beyond that of preserving University records to encompass what he saw as his responsibility as a public historian. While his brief from the University clearly included an extension of his earlier survey work for the Business Archives Council of Australia (Victorian Branch), he also saw it as a legitimate part of his role to continue his National Trust-related activities in identifying and seeking to preserve buildings and precincts and, a little later, industrial history and industrial archaeology sites. Moreover, he saw it as his responsibility to take every opportunity to direct non-archival material encountered in the field towards appropriate custodial institutions, so that his early field trips would include seeking business and private papers for the Archives, research into and photography of historic fixed structures and sites, talks to local societies, newspapers and radio stations about preserving records and buildings, and the channelling of items to the University Library – whether the Baillieu or an appropriate branch or department, to Leonhard Adam's ethnological collection, to the Medical History unit and museum, or to one of the new universities.

Indeed this assumption of a roving brief had begun with his experiences while travelling with Serle's survey party in the Western District while a student, when he would bring back for Leonhard Adam an Aboriginal axe head found in a paddock, and alert John Mulvaney to the existence in Hamilton of the score book from the 1868 Aboriginal cricket tour of England (or *Cricket Walkabout*, as Mulvaney would title his book on the subject). Strahan recollected this as 'generative of what would develop as my addiction to archival research, and ultimately the development of the University of Melbourne Archives'.

The Anderson mill at Smeaton exemplified Strahan's *modus operandi* – an initial tip-off from Geoff Blainey reinforced by contact with Cr Ted Semmens (himself an earlier contact of Crawford and Serle's) in Creswick, an impressive bluestone structure with a massive Ballarat-made water wheel (and prime candidate for National Trust attention, which would eventually become a Heritage Victoria property), plus a collection of business records from a concern which flourished during

and beyond the gold rush. The records would be collected by Strahan the following month (November 1962) while he was in Ballarat for a three-day conference which he helped organise in his Business Archives Council persona.

A typical trip illustrating the multi-strung bow approach was through the Western District in February 1961 with 'John' O'Brien of History; they visited several properties such as 'Titanga' and 'Gnarput', where Frank would examine any surviving records and argue for their transfer while O'Brien photographed the homesteads and outbuildings, for his own research and for the National Trust. Frank would often take photographs as well. There were preliminary visits also to Dennys Lascelles, Strachan's, Bright & Hitchcocks and Geelong Permanent Building Society in Geelong. At 'Purrumbete' they inspected and borrowed a superb 1858 von Guerard oil of the homestead and lake which had been suggested as an illustration for the Kiddle's *Men of Yesterday*; this was cleaned and duly appeared as the jacket and frontispiece. He also returned with boxes of books from Titanga which were given to the Baillieu Library, with the agreement that they would pass on any not wanted to the new Monash University.

Later that year they visited the Maryborough area, securing for the Archives the Joyce and Bucknall papers and the Kuffer photographs (including one of a 32-stone procuress at the Chinese camp named Wy Fook or 'Fat Mag', whose casket, when she was buried at Chewton, the undertakers were unable to fit into the hearse), books for the Baillieu, Medical, Architecture and Law libraries, pharmacy items for the Medical Museum; they took photographs of many buildings for the National Trust, and Frank also listed the records of several local councils which had been dumped in the Carisbrook Town Hall.

Another important trip in this period was that which he made to the north-east in May 1962 with *Meanjin* editor Clem Christesen, 'his interest being the Kelly country'. The trip yielded a number of collections (Foord, Chateau Tahbilk, Trenerry Brown) and objects (a slab from the Kelly homestead at Greta West, and photographs of alleged Kelly fortifications, and a number of objects from a Wangaratta pharmacy for the Medical History Museum). It also reinforced Frank's fondness for the northeast, and led to a range of ongoing National Trust projects, particularly the restoration of the granite Beechworth powder magazine and the industrial history investigation of the old Wallaby gold mine site at the Nine Mile Creek near Stanley. From it would also come the

purchase and gradual restoration, with fellow syndicate members, of the first brick hotel building in Beechworth. Frank was at this time already pursuing the question of securing the *Meanjin* archive, which eventually did come to the Archives after his retirement, having been initially acquired by the Library because it had a budget for purchasing collections, which the Archives has never had.

A particularly fruitful and extensive foray in January 1963 involved Frank and a companion from History at Monash in an 1800 kilometre swing through Warrnambool, Portland ('the most disappointing place I have yet seen - our earliest settlement but due to burnings now one of our worst documented'), Hamilton, Horsham, Hopetoun and Ararat and back through Warrnambool, securing several new collections as well as material for the Baillieu Library and Medical Museum. Several newspapers interviews and two broadcast talks later, they returned, laden, 'with upturned snout and a liberal coating of dust and insect carcasses'.

There were many such regional trips in those early years (one also being his honeymoon!), and later acquisitions of Melbourne-based records would entail visits to Broken Hill, Sydney, Hobart and Western Australia. Accompanying Frank was an exhilarating experience: a good-humoured and persuasive diplomat, who could be quite direct and assertive where need be, his passion for history was infectious.

These endeavours are well documented in the Archives in a series of letters to Vice-Chancellor Sir George Paton (to whom he reported directly in those days), a liberal and enlightened boss with first-hand experience of library and archives matters at State, Commonwealth and university level - a truly felicitous conjunction of personalities in a common purpose.

Mark Richmond

Endnote

1 Until shortly before his death he had been finishing an *ADB* entry on the biscuit manufacturer TB Guest, and chapters on the Carlton Association (a resident action group of which he had been a founder and leader) and on the burning of Wilson Hall for a book on that suburb edited by Peter Yule, and both pieces will now appear posthumously.