

Emeritus Professor RG Neale, first Director-General of the National Archives of Australia (1919–2004)

Jim Stokes reflects on the life of his friend and mentor. Photograph kindly provided by Alex Bellis and Ann Neale.



Emeritus Professor Robert George (Bob) Neale AO, first Director-General of the Australian Archives (now National Archives of Australia), died in Canberra on 1 May 2004 at the age of eighty-five.

Bob was born at Werribee, Victoria, on 7 March 1919, the son of an orchardist. He was educated at Melbourne Boys' High School and the University of Melbourne, graduating with First Class Honours in History in 1939. He was also a swimmer, footballer and lifelong supporter of the Carlton Football Club.

Bob commenced a teaching career at Mildura and he completed a Diploma of Education in 1941, but like so many of his generation his life was changed by the Second World War. He enlisted in the Second Australian Imperial Force and saw service in New Guinea and later in training and education in Australia. He reached the rank of Lieutenant and later recalled that he became known as 'Ninety Days Neale', because this was a common punishment meted out to soldiers whom he defended against disciplinary charges.

Bob joined the History Department of the University of Queensland in 1945 as Lecturer, becoming Professor in 1965. He also completed an MA degree and published *Britain and American Imperialism 1898–1902* in 1965. He gained a reputation as an incisive and inspiring teacher and he carried a major part of the administrative workload of the department.

In 1970 Bob was appointed Editor of Historical Documents in the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra. His main task was to lead the publication of the series of volumes entitled *Documents on Australian Foreign Policy 1937–49*. The documents project, initiated by Sir Paul Hasluck, set out to research systematically the records of the Foreign Affairs, Defence, the Prime Minister's and other Australian government departments so that records documenting the development of Australian foreign policy could be identified and copied. The copies were grouped by subject in an artificial series from which selections for publication were made. The artificial series is itself a unique research resource and is now in the custody of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library.

Bob set the highest research and editorial standards and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has now published more than twenty volumes of annotated documents on the principles that he established. He put together a small research and editorial team to which he gave great encouragement and loyalty throughout his life. Those of us who worked with him on the project will always remember him with affection and gratitude. We will also remember his Editorial Advisory Board of distinguished academics such as Gordon Greenwood and Norman Harper and the memorably convivial gatherings that followed their meetings.

Bob made the transition from academia to the senior levels of the public service with skill and enthusiasm. The Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Sir Keith Waller, saw Bob as not only the leader of the documents project but also an adviser to give historical context to policy decisions. Accordingly, he regularly attended the meetings of division heads known as 'morning prayers'. He and his team produced reports using quite recent and highly classified records on the history of Australia's relations with the Peoples' Republic of China and on the origins of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. The Vietnam report of 1975 attracted much attention when it was tabled in Parliament.

In the early 1970s, the 30-year public access rule was still in its infancy and many of the records of the Second World War period were still held by the creating agencies, notably Defence. At first Bob was the only member of the documents team allowed to hold a security clearance to access records containing signals intelligence material. He had to convince that formidable bureaucrat Sir Arthur Tange that he was a suitable person to be let loose in the Defence records strongrooms. He

achieved this, in part through giving Defence a seat on the Editorial Advisory Board. From then on, he fascinated and occasionally infuriated the team by returning from Defence and Cabinet Office with yet more documents for publication, even if this required an entire draft volume to be renumbered and cross-referenced.

In 1975 Bob was appointed as the first Director-General of the Australian Archives. The establishment of this position was one of the many recommendations in the report entitled *Development of the National Archives* by the Canadian archivist Dr W Kaye Lamb in 1973. The Lamb report, endorsed in general terms by the Whitlam government in 1974, gave Bob a challenging list of tasks. Looking back on the Lamb report it is clear how many of its recommendations were achieved or at least significantly advanced during Bob's eight years as Director-General.

Bob's task was essentially to develop a relatively small and inconspicuous organisation into a nationally recognised institution providing high quality recordkeeping and archival services to the Australian government and people. Under his leadership the Archives grew substantially and undertook many new initiatives that were fundamental to the creation of the National Archives as we know it.

His success lay in his skill as a tactician, diplomat and advocate. He was a shrewd judge of people and issues and he was quick to discern muddled thinking and special pleading. At first sight he could appear formidable. Staff would be summoned to his office with a curt phone call beginning 'Neale here' and as you said your piece he would run a penetrating and cynical eye over you. But if you convinced him of your case he would accept it and give you credit for it. He was, as one former colleague put it, 'a gentleman of the old school'. He formed a vital bridge between the professional staff at the Archives and the outside world of parliamentary committees and senior bureaucrats in departments such as the Prime Minister's, Attorney-General's, Defence and Finance departments, all of whom were necessary to the achievement of the Archives' objectives.

Bob's outstanding achievement was the enactment of the Archives Act in 1983. The Act established the Archives on a statutory basis and laid down stringent conditions for public access to and disposal of Commonwealth records. The drafting of the legislation and its negotiation through major departments and parliamentary committees

took nearly a decade and Bob's skill, tenacity and diplomacy ensured that Australia gained invaluable national archival legislation that is still effective today. Those with the opportunity to read the files on the Archives Bill will be struck by the huge amount of work that Bob, Chris Hurley and others put into the legislation, their attention to principle and detail and their determination to get the Bill enacted in the face of almost every conceivable obstacle and delay.

Bob's other dominant preoccupation was the need to obtain adequate accommodation for the Archives. In 1975, Canberra staff and records were housed in several sub-standard buildings. Many of the most valuable records were stored in prefabricated huts dangerously close to flood level at Lake Burley Griffin. Bob was determined to give the Archives a national building in central Canberra that would not only provide adequate accommodation for records and staff but also define the Archives as one of the great national cultural institutions. He carried the vision forward by initiating design competitions and detailed planning, only to be defeated by money, politics and bureaucracy. His greatest regret when he retired was the failure to secure a national building, though the work that he had done certainly moved the Archives towards eventually finding a new home. Bob also presided over a major building program that included the Mitchell repository and public research facilities in Canberra and new repositories in Hobart, Perth and Darwin.

Bob also devoted a lot of effort to building up the staff resources and professional strength of the Archives. A joint management review in 1981 set up a new staff structure on functional lines that broadly operated for many years. It provided the framework for addressing more adequately the traditional backlog problem areas of appraisal, preservation and public access and it embraced the Archives' first moves into the development of the electronic records control systems that became the RecordSearch database.

Bob retired as Director-General of Australian Archives in March 1984 and he was created an Officer of the Order of Australia in the Australia Day honours of 1985.

Bob married Darthea Shanahan in 1942 and they had two sons, Robert and William, both of whom spoke movingly of their father at his funeral

service in Canberra. Darthea's death in 1974 was a bitter blow for Bob, but his second marriage in 1979 to Ann Lahey, an old friend and colleague from Queensland University, was outstandingly happy. Bob and Ann maintained their contact with the Archives and they were always welcome guests at major events. It clearly gave him much pleasure that the move of the National Archives to East Block in 1998 at last brought the Archives the national building for which he had campaigned for so long.