

# Letter to the Editor

## Dear Editor

In your November 2004 issue you published a most generous review by Bob Sharman of Professor Bill Russell's *A Matter of Record; A History of Public Record Office Victoria*. He noted the work was in many ways a tribute to two people, the first Keeper Harry Nunn and the fourth Keeper Ross Gibbs, though he discussed only the first. One suspects there was much more the reviewer could have said, having been Nunn's contemporary and equivalent in Tasmania and Queensland, and having written (in this journal in August 1973, but surprisingly not attributed in the history) one of the earliest analyses of the landmark Victorian legislation. I will mention tribute, the reviewer and the book's approach to referencing again shortly.

My purpose in writing is to offer readers an expanded and alternative view to that presented in the history about the appointment of the fourth Keeper in 1991-92. Professor Russell wrote that:

Gibbs had extensive experience in the library field, having been head of the State Library's Manuscripts Collection as well as Acting La Trobe Librarian. He had developed the Carringbush Regional Library Service and was Director of Victorian Library Services at the time of his new appointment as Keeper. However, many members and supporters of the archival profession and Public Record Office Victoria were suspicious of Gibbs' appointment and a public campaign was launched to oppose it. A large display advertisement was taken out in *The Age* and questions were asked in Parliament. Yet Gibbs weathered the storm, and it rapidly became apparent that he had the qualities of resolve, the leadership skills and the vision to deal with administrative turbulence and push the Office forward. Later he was to become convener and reviver of the Melbourne branch of the Society of Archivists, and to be awarded the Public Service Medal for his services to Archives (p. 137).

Reading these words one might conclude that some troublesome archivists, PROV staff and camp followers were just picking on the fourth Keeper, but he had the qualities of character to weather the storm, and to turn around the professional situation as well.

In fact, there were important archival issues at stake, especially given the previous two year's events leading up to and following Chris Hurley's removal as second Keeper and the so-called archival heritage agenda. To Professor Russell himself this was 'something of a blind alley in Victoria's archival development' (p.135), earlier noting that during 1990-92 the PROV 'faced a serious challenge to its survival' (p. 131). Yes, and some of us prone to suspicion thought so at the time. Things were considered so serious that the Australian Society of Archivists' (ASA) national council *and* the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) resorted to a joint public campaign. The trigger for this was the advertising in early 1992, just within the Victorian Public Service, of the position of Director, Archives and Libraries which it was feared would effectively amalgamate the PROV and Office of Library Services. At the ASA Council meeting of 3-4 April 1992 which took that decision were Chris Coggin, Paul Brunton, Bob Sharman, Jenni Davidson, Peter Orlovich, Di Osborne, Colin Smith, Steve Stuckey and myself. The remaining Council member, Chris Hurley, was absent. The protesting 'advertisement' was authorised by the ASA President, Chris Coggin and ALIA's President Bev Kirby.

There remain any number of puzzles about the book generally and certainly its treatment of this 'double hat' saga. Needless to say, the campaign target was the Minister for the Arts Jim Kennan, *not* Ross Gibbs, who as Acting Director, Archival Heritage/Keeper of Public Records at the time and presumed to be an applicant for the new position. He was informed by the ASA Council as a courtesy that the item was to appear and responded with appreciation. That is why the ASA's item in *The Age* was headed 'An Open Letter to Mr Kennan'. Yet this book personalised that particular account, as it did elsewhere in describing the fourth Keeper's 'skilful use of exhibitions, publicity and public relations' (p.134) and as one who 'guided Public Record Office Victoria through the turbulent 1990s' (p.150). One assumes he was happy with these tributes, as he 'commissioned' the history (Acknowledgements),

'supported ... and made ... [it] possible' (Introduction), and was himself a source (Notes, p. 211).

A final puzzle concerns the book's use of supporting references. The words quoted earlier from page 137 are unreferenced. Its very title, prominent acknowledgement of Charlie Farrugia's 'original archival research' and promise in the Introduction of 'extensive endnotes' belie the uneven use of sources, which became more selective and less archival as the 1980s and 1990s were discussed. For the period covered by the quote, there is nothing to follow up; no mention of the PROV's own relevant elusive file, no mention of *The Age's* details (for those interested it was 8 April 1992, p. 5) and no mention of any other sources, eg the ASA Council minutes held by the Australian National University's Archives Program, the ASA *Bulletin* no. 102 April 1992 and the Public Records Support Group's *Newsletter* 1990-1992. (Surprisingly, I could find it mentioned nowhere in the history, despite several references to two of its patrons Professors Geoff Serle and A G L Shaw. The vol. 3 no. 6 issue of 30 September 1992, covering the Office of Merit Protection's finding that the recruitment process for the merged Director position was so flawed as to require applicants to be re-interviewed is especially informative.)

Professor Russell noted in his introduction that *A Matter of Record* was 'completed in a relatively short time and is not intended to offer the last word on the subject'. In my view, his history up to the end of the Nunn era will become the standard account. It is an excellent piece of narrative writing. But I always feel uneasy when official histories, even by unrushed authors with no connection to the subject who achieve balanced accounts by common agreement of an editorial committee, cover the reign of those who commission them. In the case in question, for the post Nunn era particularly, indeed it probably won't be the last word on the subject.

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