

Obituary

Dr Thea Melvie Exley (1923 - 2007)



Thea Exley as Director, Preservation (centre) with Colin Webb and Ina Koneczna, examining a Proclamation by Queen Victoria. From the collection of the National Archives of Australia.

Thea Exley was an inaugural member of the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) and served as a Councillor from 1977-79. She was the first woman to head a regional office of the Commonwealth Archives Office, now the National Archives of Australia (NAA), its first national Senior Archivist Reference and Access and the first Director Preservation at the Australian Archives (another predecessor of the NAA).

She was seen as a role model not only by women but by men. Colleagues spoke to me of her energy and capacity for work, her ability to see the

funny side of situations, her fitness honed by bushwalking and cross country skiing, her hospitality, her good cooking and her love of cats. She was particularly remembered for the way she welcomed people to the profession, genuinely listened to their ideas and supported them early in their careers. It is not uncommon for new, young staff to feel that the higher levels of management are unapproachable and in the 1970s and 1980s this was certainly the case in the Australian Archives. But Thea is warmly remembered by the generation of archivists (who were young in those days) from their job interviews, her invitations to coffee on arrival and her capacity to make them feel valued. She was always encouraging and infectiously enthusiastic about the joys and challenges of archives work.

Thea was born in Melbourne on 2 September 1923 the only child of Adelaide (nee Walker) and Harold James Exley who became Deputy Commonwealth Statistician, Tasmania.

She also lived in Canberra before moving with her family to Hobart in 1933. She attended The Friends' School and subsequently graduated from the University of Tasmania with a Bachelor of Arts degree. During the Second World War she undertook library training at the Commonwealth National Library and on returning to Hobart worked at the Public Library there. After the war she travelled overseas and worked for a time at the library of Australia House London.¹

On her return she was invited by the Commonwealth National Librarian Harold White (later Sir Harold) to join the staff of the Archives Division of the National Library. This led to her joining the Archives Division's Melbourne office as an Archives Officer Grade I on 26 February 1953. Her work in Melbourne gave her a solid understanding of the practicalities of archives work as well as an opportunity to participate in the significant developments within the Archives in those still early days. She met the United States expert TR Schellenberg on his 1954 visit and he wrote to her afterwards:

I imagine that by now you are well established in your new quarters in Melbourne. The building is quite elegant, and it is a pity it is not available for archival purposes in Canberra instead of being located in Melbourne.²

Australian Archives staff in the 1990s who moved out of the former dry-cleaning factory at Brighton to which Schellenberg refers might have

found it difficult to credit the sense of excitement which Thea remembered when the Archives secured this building, but it was of course the Archives premier facility at the time. She spent a good deal of time in discussion with manufacturers in Melbourne during the development of the Archives Type 1 Box and she was always keen to contribute comments on the developments in description and control of records which occupied so much time in the Canberra Office culminating in the Commonwealth Record Series system.

In 1961 she became the first woman to head a state office of the Commonwealth Archives Office (the successor to the Archives Division). At a time when there were very few women in senior positions in the Commonwealth public service this must be seen as a significant achievement.

During her time in Melbourne she was involved in an unsuccessful attempt to form a professional association for archivists. She attended the 1956 meeting of archivists from several states and became a member of the steering committee formed. Her notes on the survey of thirty-two potential Australian members indicate that she was not one of the seventeen positively in favour, but rather was uncertain about its viability and effectiveness.³

She was subsequently on the committee of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia (LAA), at that time the only Australian association which brought archivists together. She was interested in establishing proper training for archivists, and despite expressing some concerns about the appropriateness of librarians overseeing training for archivists, served as an examiner for the LAA's paper in records management from 1963-66.

In 1970 she moved to Canberra as the first Senior Archivist, Reference and Access. As Jim Stokes⁴ makes clear, the Australian Government's access policy was subject to a number of changes and some difficulties in this period. The thirty year rule for public access was adopted by the Gorton government in 1970 except for Cabinet records and a provision for qualified access to records created before the end of the Second World War. In 1972 the McMahon government extended public access to records up to 1945 and set a thirty year rule for Cabinet records. Exemption categories, including personal distress and embarrassment; and sources of defence, security and economic intelligence, were set out and refined.

Since these rules were themselves confidential Cabinet decisions, the Archives found itself in some difficulties discussing the access regime with its clients and the climate of criticism continued.

The McMahon government did recognise the size of the task that the Archives had been given and more than twenty access examiners were employed to work their way through the records. This was the period in which proactive examination of records was begun and it was an important change from the previous regime where records were only examined in response to a particular researcher's request, although of course specific requests continued and had to be dealt with.

One of Thea's first tasks in her new role was to visit university history departments to discuss the Archives' services. This proactive communication was not routine for the Archives in the 1970s so it is worth acknowledging her efforts.

Discussion among access examiners and supervising staff were lively and heartfelt. It was under Thea's guidance that these discussions, and the decisions that resulted, were collected into a substantial body of policy, precedent and advice which became the foundation of the later *Australian Archives Access Services Manual*. It is easy to dismiss the development of a manual as a typically bureaucratic response but, in the difficult situation which had to be handled, it provided the basis for consistency which contributes to accountability and fairness in government decision-making. When I spoke to Thea in 2004 she gave me the impression that she regarded the development of the access regime in this period as her most significant professional contribution.

She also remembered the 'agonisingly long meetings' which led to the eventual successful formation of the ASA. Canadian archivists were also talking about a separate association at this time and she shared the papers from the early meetings with Jay Atherton, Head of the Public Records Section at the Public Archives of Canada whom she had met when attending a meeting of the International Council of the Round Table on Archives (CITRA) in Ottawa.⁵

From 1977-81 Thea was Chief Archivist with considerable responsibility for the operational work of the office while other senior staff members were taken up with the continuing development of the *Archives Act* (1983). In 1982 and 1983 she was Regional Director, ACT when the first purpose

built repository in Canberra (in the suburb of Mitchell) became operational.

During her term on the Council of the ASA (1977-79), Thea chaired its first Public Issues Committee. Submissions on copyright, privacy and freedom of information were made to the committees and enquiries then active in South Australia, New South Wales and the Commonwealth. Her work in access, and also in reference, over the immediately preceding years well qualified her for this role.

In 1984 Thea became the Australian Archives' first Director Conservation. While the Archives had provided conservation laboratories in the new buildings which were opened in the 1970s and 1980s and had employed some conservators, the organisation lacked a developed policy framework for preservation. Thea developed a small central team and, involving the existing technical staff, set about managing the prospective, preventive and corrective aspects of the function. She arranged for the first condition survey of the collection to be undertaken so that the Archives would have an overview of the preservation task it faced. This led to a much greater emphasis on environmental and storage issues and to conservators having a much stronger voice on the way records were handled by staff and researchers. The set out in table format: 'Guidelines for Records Storage' which are now part of the National Archives *Standard for Physical Storage of Commonwealth Records* were first conceived and drafted during Thea's term as Director. Manuals of policy, procedure and guidance were developed for both conservation and reprography, and basic statistics such as the number of conservation treatments carried out began to be collected. Preservation staff who worked at the Australian Archives before and during Thea's leadership very much admired the changes that she brought about. Her work was significant in providing a management focus in this critical area.⁶

Thea retired on 1 September 1988. At her retirement function she commented that length of service was not necessarily an indication of a valuable contribution to an organisation. Nevertheless, her own professional expertise and personal dedication to the Archives over some thirty-five years must be recognised as a very substantial contribution to its development. She received an Australia Day award for her work in 1989.

After her retirement Thea studied Art History and in 2000 was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the Australian National University for her thesis titled 'Patronage by proxy: art competitions in Australia during the twentieth century'. While Australia might not be famous as a nation of art lovers, it has actually set up a very considerable number of art competitions. Thea was intrigued by this phenomenon and believed that these competitions were a way of developing a community approach to art which fostered the wider development of critical ideas.

She continued to travel adding Antarctica to a list of destinations which already included bushwalking in Tasmania and New Guinea, trekking to the Everest Base Camp and visits to a long list of countries in Europe, Asia and America.

She did not neglect sorting her own archive as the files held at the Noel Butlin Archives Centre and donations of a Bible from the estate of her grandfather and other publications to the National Library of Australia show.

Thea continued to take an interest in the profession and the National Archives. She sometimes attended local ASA meetings and was present when Ross Gibbs, the then newly appointed Director-General of the National Archives, spoke to the ACT Branch about his ideas and plans. The National Archives named a meeting room in its Mitchell building after her in 2003. The announcement of her presence at the opening of the National Archives office at North Melbourne in 2004, coincidentally fifty years after the move to that dry-cleaning factory, was greeted with rousing applause. She was present at the Society's thirtieth anniversary seminar 'Made Kept and Used' in April 2005.

Thea died on 29 January 2007 after nearly two years of illness and almost twenty years after her retirement. Three former heads of National Archives and the widow of a fourth attended her funeral along with some two dozen current and former staff of the National Archives. Stephen Ellis, Assistant Director-General Government represented the NAA and Hilary Rowell represented the ASA. Together with a large number of family and friends connected with all the other aspects and phases of her life we farewelled a valued colleague and a much loved friend.

Jill Caldwell

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the many colleagues who have shared their memories of Thea with me for this obituary: Glenda Acland, Ian Batterham, Venetia Beale, Di Easter, Stephen Ellis, Marian Hoy, Ross Latham, Hilary Rowell, Kylie Scroope, Ross Shannon, Maggie Shapley, Clive Smith, Jim Stokes, Steve Stuckey, David Stone and Stephen Yorke. Responsibility for the piece is of course my own.



Staff in the Archives' Victorian office, Brighton with Thea Exley on the far left.
From the collection of the National Archives of Australia.

Endnotes

¹ I am indebted to Elizabeth Trethewie, daughter of Thea's close childhood friend Ann Gray, who allowed me to use details from her funeral oration covering Thea's early life and her views on art competitions.

² National Archives of Australia, 'Our history', at <<http://ourhistory.naa.gov.au/melbourne.html/>>.

³ Thea deposited files relating to her activity with the unsuccessful attempt to form an archives association, her work with the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia and her work with the ASA with the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University (NBAC) in 2003. See Z22 Boxes 4 and 97.

⁴ HJW Stokes, 'The Evolution of Commonwealth Access Policy' in McKemmish, Sue and Piggott, Michael (eds), at <http://ourhistory.naa.gov.au/library/records_continuum.html>.

⁵ NBAC, ASA, Z22 Box 97, Folder 6 Exley to Jay [Atherton] 14 November 1974.

⁶ I am indebted to Ian Batterham, Stephen Ellis and Kylie Scroope for their assistance with assessing the significance of Thea's work as Director Preservation.