

The University's 1956 Centenary Celebrations

BY CECILY CLOSE

As a committee commenced planning for the University's 150th anniversary celebrations, an article appeared in the Library Journal (V. 5, No. 1, June 1999) recalling the Jubilee of 1906. Now, the 150th celebrations being well launched, we recall another great University occasion – the celebration of the University's Centenary in 1956.

Planning for the Centenary

The University of Melbourne's centenary was first considered in November 1947.¹ If the University of Sydney celebrated in 1952, a draft memorandum inquired, could Melbourne do so in 1953? Having noted the 1906 Jubilee arrangements, the memorandum recommended some years' preparation. It also mentioned Professor Crawford's proposal that "the recent history of the University should be published". But the subject was dropped until 1951 when the University Council appointed a Centenary

committee.² It first met on 10 May to receive suggestions for exploration.³

It was decided that 1955 (not 1953) was to be the "Centenary Year", commemorating the University's opening and first lectures given on 13 April 1855. Possible models were considered.⁴ Proposals were numerous⁵ and of those carried through most were in modified form. A "supplementary volume" to Scott's *A History of the University of Melbourne*, 1936, was discussed; also demonstrations in

science, medicine and agriculture, though all faculties and departments were to be represented. It was decided to invite distinguished men to receive honorary degrees. A proposed drama festival (Acting Vice-Chancellor Professor Paton suggested inviting Ngaio Marsh and her Canterbury Players⁶) was perhaps abandoned when it became known that the National Union of Australian University Students (NUAUS) drama festival was to take place in Melbourne in 1955.

Above: Brochures advertising the University's Centenary appeal events, 1955. (University of Melbourne Archives.)

For a book on the University, Paton recommended as a model Bristol's 75th anniversary publication, *The Life of a University*.⁷ The committee agreed but hoped also for the more "formal" continuation of Scott's *History*. A possible collection of lectures and essays was later considered,⁸ but did not appear.

To discuss details the committee appointed a "music, drama and general" sub-committee, which co-opted professors representing, respectively, Music, Fine Arts, Physics, Law, Engineering and English, and R.W.T. Cowan, Master of Trinity, to represent the colleges. When they first met on 25 February 1952, the University was mourning the loss of Wilson Hall by fire a month before, but they settled to their task, considered fresh suggestions and obtained a staff organiser in B.C.J. Meredith, warden of the Union. In December Paton reported on the University of Sydney centenary, held in August, which had greatly impressed him by the efficiency of its arrangements and from which he had brought much useful material.

Indecision

The timing of Melbourne's celebrations was soon in doubt, however. Completion of the new Wilson Hall, essential for the formal ceremonies, was likely to be delayed. Throughout 1953 and 1954 this and other factors affected planning. Could the celebrations safely be set for March 1956, or should they be delayed until March to May 1957 to avoid Melbourne's winter weather and the Olympic Games in November 1956? In October 1955, however, it was clear that Wilson Hall would be ready early in 1956, although time had to be allowed for arrangements to be made with overseas individuals and universities. August 1956 was settled upon. Meredith having left the University, Brigadier R.G.H. Irving became the Centenary organiser.

At the Centenary committee's April 1954 meeting three publications were

agreed upon. Having now seen Bristol's book, the Centenary committee agreed that such a work, profusely illustrated by photographs, very readable and describing university activities in a general way, should be produced and issued in fairly large numbers at the Centenary, preferably free. The second was a booklet like *The University of Sydney — a Description*, of some 32 pages with attractive etchings or drawings of the most noteworthy buildings. The third and perhaps most important would be the continuation of Scott already discussed with Professor Crawford and members of the History School. A small professorial committee was to obtain suggestions as to these publications. A round figure of £15,000 was mentioned as likely to cover the costs of these, and of travelling grants to overseas visitors.

The Centenary Appeal

The University being in great need of new buildings and as usual short of funds, a Centenary appeal was agreed to, though it was not to be the occasion's main purpose. But in view of the sums received in gifts and bequests in 1952 (almost £200,000) and in 1953 (£136,000), the committee wondered whether the appeal should not be delayed until after the Centenary celebrations; but hesitation was brief. A "million-pound appeal" was decided upon in July 1954.

Poynter and Rasmussen have described both the course of the appeal (it reached £570,750.18.6 including interest by 8 November 1957) and the formal celebrations.⁹ Here we recall these together with less formal events, which either raised funds directly, or simply sought to attract support for the University by bringing its work to the attention of the whole Victorian community.¹⁰ Under other circumstances some of these events would have coalesced around the celebrations, as they had done in 1906.

Careful planning preceded the meeting of representatives of the

professions, business, Parliament, and the City of Melbourne at the University on 26 October 1954 to inaugurate the appeal. Essington Lewis was selected and secured as appeal chairman, Sir Dallas Brooks, Governor of Victoria and University Visitor, was to be patron, and Brigadier Irving prepared outline notes for speakers. No women were to be invited "on this occasion".¹¹ After hearing Sir Dallas Brooks and the Vice-Chancellor on the University's value to the community and its needs, an appeal committee was formed, soon to become a large "citizens committee", with numerous sub-committees created, including a women's committee. An appeal office was set up under Brigadier Irving.

The press and radio sub-committee, assisted by Paton's weekly press briefings, assured good press coverage for the appeal; and Clive Turnbull, retained to write publicity material, produced articles in many organisations' journals, letters and articles in the Melbourne and country press, and numerous "Radio Scatters".¹²

At the official launch on 13 April 1955 (a luncheon at the Lower Melbourne Town Hall), Sir Dallas Brooks as patron again urged the University's claims to community support. Paton dwelt colourfully on deficiencies: the Department of Architecture housed in a temporary hut; Visual Aids in a shanty that would disgrace Camp Pell; teaching and research hampered in "shockingly overcrowded" medical departments; Psychology staff keeping fit moving among their scattered rooms; and the central administration divided between sheds and gothic splendour (off the Quadrangle). Patching sheds, turning corridors into laboratories, using old houses as classrooms and expensive equipment at risk: such were the University's prospects. He challenged doubters to tour the worst buildings and the best (he mentioned some improvements) on Open Day on 23 April.¹³

Ancient and Modern For University Celebration



The Centenary's Open Day included an exhibition of riding on early Melbourne's bicycles. Here Margaret Jones, with her "modern" 1955 model, admires the older models paraded by Frank Strahan (founding University Archivist) and Judy Findlay. (*The Age*, 20 April 1955, University Archives.)

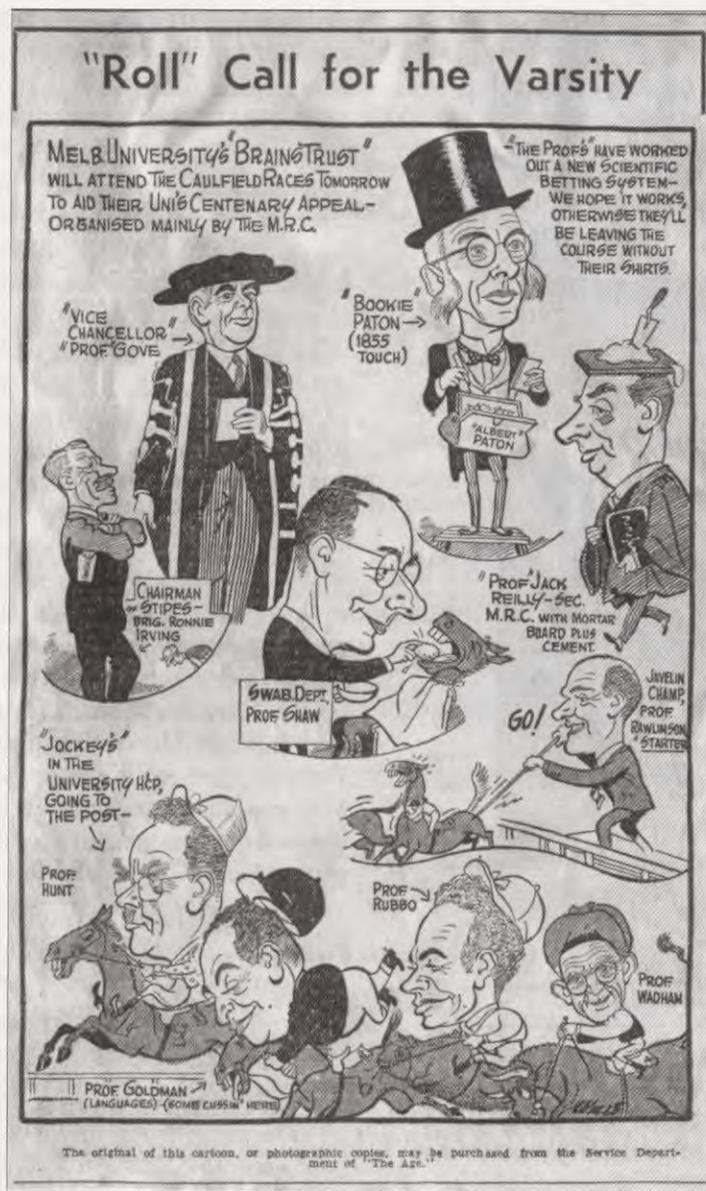
The substantial appeal brochure included "material things the money will provide": the "new" Wilson Hall; the Beaurepaire Sports Centre (with thanks to Sir Frank Beaurepaire); International House; extensions for Agriculture; the new "Russell Grimwade" Biochemistry School; the library; two new storeys for the "New Arts" building ("Babel"); a new Hydraulics laboratory for the Engineering School; new accommodation for Visual Aids, so vitally necessary with the advent of television; and for sections of Commonwealth Government departments whose work was essential to University research. A book room and bank building would be "tucked into the quadrangle for easy accessibility". Later in 1955 and "indirectly related" to the appeal, *Discovery* appeared, attractively presenting University research to the layman.¹⁴

The Activities

The Programme for Open Day on Saturday 23 April 1955 shows continuous lectures and demonstrations, films and music, running from 2.00 pm to 5.30 pm and 7.00 pm to 10.00 pm. Professors or senior staff in every discipline participated. Offerings included "What are philosophers up to?", "Some chemical effects of light", "Some popular applications of statistics", "The Russian alphabet taught in 30 minutes", readings of T.S. Eliot and "What is Islam? (with slides)". The "Moniac" machine demonstrated the operation of the economic system; the Cyclotron was on public view for the first time. Undergraduates Judy Finlay and Frank Strahan (later University Archivist), had arranged an "Early Melbourne Exhibition" for the Historical Society. Over the year individual departments held "open weeks".

The International House committee, working for their opening in 1957, set aside some fundraising as required. Their fair became "the Centenary Fair", lending colour to the whole but by agreement earning funds for their own cause. Auxiliary members gathered blackberries and orchard windfalls to make jam for sale and for Devonshire teas, held jumble sales, sewed, grew plants and ran the Union Theatre coffee stall.¹⁵ From 13 to 14 May "one large fairground" where students in gowns sold programs, the University was decorated with gaily painted signs and awnings in rainbow hues. Asian students donned national costumes, performed folk dances and tended an arts and crafts display, including a Pakistani bridal suite and trousseau. There were magicians, puppet shows and a "Wild Colonial" exhibition; some professors acted as sideshow barkers. In the Union Theatre visitors could watch films or Mrs James Buchanan's historical pageant of University academic and sporting life.

Some city churches and the synagogue supported the University in its appeal on 16 and 17 April, and Paton consented to "preach" at the Collins Street Independent Church.¹⁶ A "public launching" of the appeal on 16 May (the Town Hall was not available sooner) featured an academic procession, fanfare by RAAF trumpeters, a concert under Professor Heinze's direction and the Rt Hon. Sir Owen Dixon's address. An Arts student during the Jubilee, he recalled its events and distinguished figures and subsequent changes, and eloquently supported this present movement. Weekly organ recitals were held at the Melbourne Town Hall, an exhibition of Dr Donald Thompson's Aboriginal photographs at the Kodak Galleries, and demonstrations by the Bacteriology Department at the Myer department store (later in country towns) of the manufacture of the Salk poliomyelitis vaccine. Myer also accommodated an oriental art exhibition. Races at Caulfield were arranged for 3 December by the combined racing clubs in



A cartoon makes light of "Academia" attending the Centenary appeal race meeting, held at the Caulfield Race Course. (*The Age*, 2 December 1955, University Archives.)

Melbourne for the University's benefit.¹⁷

The women's committee, of which Lady Latham was president, was particularly energetic in organising social events. At a meeting of 50 women in Union House on 17 February 1955 with Mrs (Lady) Paton presiding, her husband and Brigadier explained the appeal's purpose and "mechanics". Lists of money-raising ideas, and of social editors to be kept informed, were

already prepared. Many were active, but as Lady Paton's files testify, much fell to her in calling together groups in the Vice-Chancellor's house to form sub-committees to run particular events, entertaining, approaching individuals and organisations and thanking them for favours.

A gala preview of Terrence Rattigan's *Separate Tables* at the Princess Theatre on 4 May ("everybody in evening dress"), was arranged by

Paton, with advice from his wife, through Dame Sybil Thorndike and Garnet Carroll, with the cordial concurrence of Sir Ralph and Lady Richardson.¹⁸ Other functions organised were a "hats through the ages" parade, demonstrations of Italian, Chinese, and American cookery, cocktail-mixing and interior decorating, a Centenary ball at the Palais de Danse in St Kilda featuring a large Winged Victory and "Crest" and tables decorated in faculty colours, a mannequin parade and cocktail party, a book carnival, a children's party and golf days at the Kingston Heath and Royal Melbourne Golf Club. Suburban groups ran their own functions.

Student Exploits

The Centenary sub-committee had decided to delay inviting graduate and student cooperation until the program was "more definite".¹⁹ Graduates were later encouraged to give directly;²⁰ but the student body as such had little part to play. Students had long been denied the opportunity to drown out an officially invited speaker as they had done at the 1906 Jubilee. Of course they had their yearly round of events such as the Varsity Annual Sports, the SRC Revue and the lunchtime procession which brought "unexpected gaiety" to the city.²¹ In "old cars, scooters, bikes, a stagecoach and a fork-lift truck", they caused a traffic jam, which a law student leapt from his float to direct. Exploits included a corroboree outside Myer, masked girls in football jumpers distributing pamphlets in a leading hotel, and a group buying an hour at a parking meter in order to have lunch in the space. The students were moved on by the police, who would later forestall their attempt to "enliven" the formal banquet of August 1956.

Official Proceedings

The appeal over, attention turned to planning to the last detail for the smooth running of the Centenary Celebrations of 14 to 16 August 1956 over which, in the absence overseas of the Chancellor,



Centenary banquet in Wilson Hall, August 1956: view from the balcony, showing guests at tables and an orchestra playing on the stage. (University Archives.)

Deputy-Chancellor C.M. Gilray would preside. A happy thought was to fly Professor Sir Frederick McCoy's granddaughters from New Zealand for the occasion.²² The 94 delegates (five of them women) were formally registered on the morning of 14 August and after a lunch officially welcomed, the oration being delivered by Sir Ian Clunies-Ross, Chairman of CSIRO, standing in at short notice for the Governor-General, Field Marshal Sir William Slim. Delegates and their spouses attended a late afternoon reception by Sir Dallas Brooks and Lady Brooks. This was followed by a University dinner for the delegates during which the Governor was presented with a loyal address to the Queen.

Driving rain had shortened the route of the academic procession that day but the sun shone for the principal ceremony next morning, when 15 honorary degrees were conferred,²³ and delegates in turn presented Addresses of Salutation from their respective institutions to the Deputy Chancellor (addresses were displayed after those in Latin had been translated by Classics staff). The Professorial Board offered luncheon to delegates in Union House (wives too ate there, but apart as guests of the women's committee) which was followed for both sexes by a late afternoon reception given by the Premier and Government of Victoria in the Royale Ballroom.

The climax followed that evening

with the banquet in Wilson Hall, the food travelling without injury from the Union House kitchens. The excluded wives, whom it had been earlier suggested might enter the balcony to hear the toasts,²⁴ instead dined comfortably at the Alexandra Club. An informal third day allowed delegates to visit University departments, have morning tea with Council and Professorial Board members (and wives) in the Union, with afternoon trips offered to Olympic Games sites or "the mountains". Over 1500 invitations had been sent out for each day and a reserve list maintained. For the uninvited there was generous press coverage of events and of distinguished visitors, especially those from overseas.

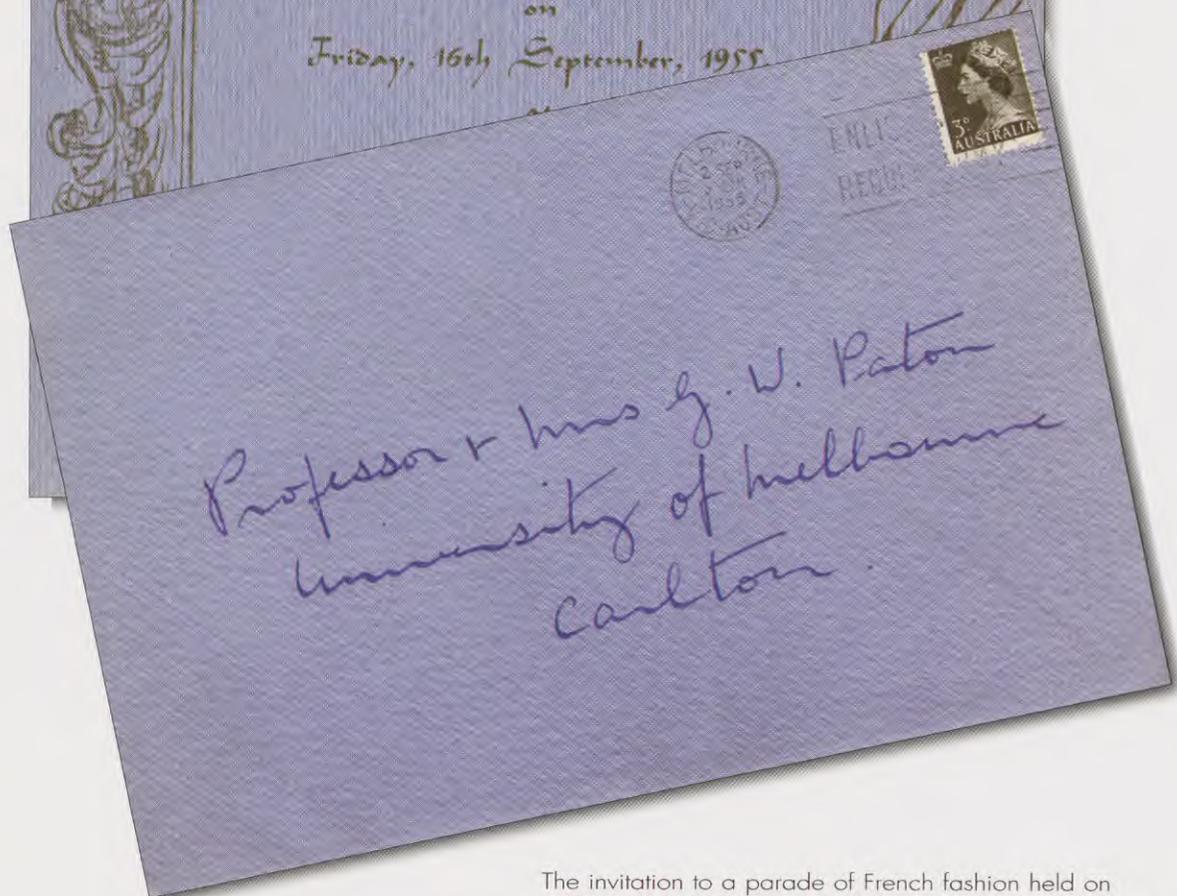
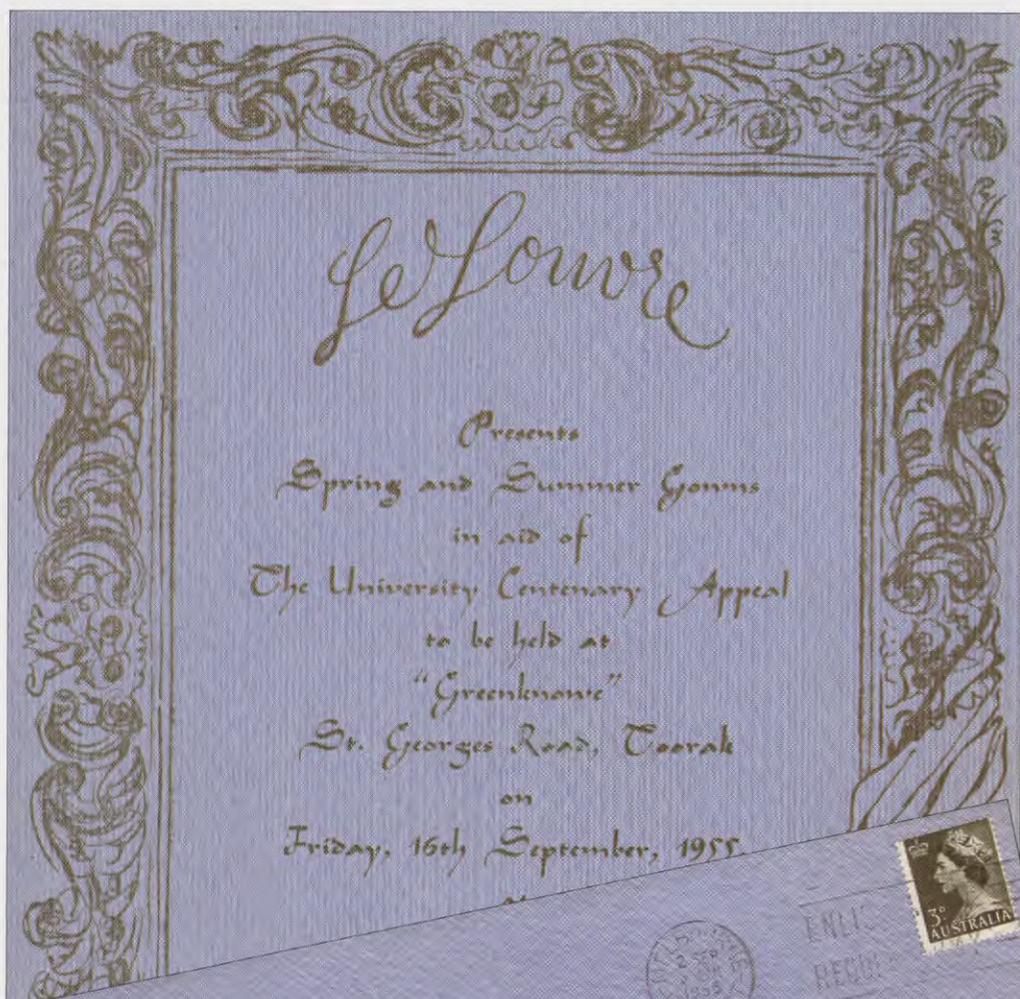
The new Wilson Hall, after causing considerable anxiety as to its completion, acoustics and design, had risen to the occasion, and if some regretted the old building, others would have agreed that the contrast between the splendidly gowned officials and guests and the "stark modernity" of its sheer black columns and mammoth glass walls was "striking and effective".²⁵ Paton recalled the morning sun shining through these walls to brighten the hues of the robes, and dwell on the banquet for which "Melbourne was ransacked for Georgian candelabra so that coffee could be served by candlelight ... an aesthetic triumph, but also a wise precaution, for a fire in the switchboard [soon extinguished by the fire brigade] would otherwise have left the Hall in complete darkness".²⁶

The publications live still. Early in 1955 the 25 year old Geoffrey Blainey had been commissioned to write *The Centenary History of the University of Melbourne*, no mere continuation of Scott, but a fresh treatment from the beginning, readable and as comprehensive as its 209 pages allowed.²⁷ It appeared late in 1957, but by August 1956 he had also written, with light touch, the text to accompany Norman Olver's photographs for *The University of Melbourne: a Centenary Portrait*, so similar in scope and production to the book on Bristol Paton admired.²⁸ In describing the contemporary University it served the purpose proposed for the 32-page booklet like Sydney's, which did not appear. Sydney may however have provided a model²⁹ for Melbourne's slim, dignified volume containing the celebration proceedings, with speeches, lists of the distinguished recipients of honorary degrees and of the delegates, and reproductions of some addresses of greeting.³⁰ ♦

Dr Cecily Close wrote on the University of Melbourne's Jubilee in 1906 in the *University of Melbourne Library Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, June 1999. She retired as University Archivist in June 1998. She thanks all staff members of the Archives who assisted her in preparing this article.

Notes

1. UM312, 1947/169. Unsigned, 8 November 1947 (perhaps written by the new Registrar, F.H. Johnston).
2. The Centenary Committee comprised the Chancellor (Hon. Sir Charles Lowe) as Chairman, Deputy Chancellor (Sir John Newman Morris), the Vice-Chancellor (Professor [Sir George] Paton, then Acting), the President of the Professorial Board (Professor A. Boyce Gibson) and Chairman of the Finance committee (Mr Herbert Taylor).
3. Centenary Committee Minute Book.
4. Especially Harvard's tercentenary on which the University of Melbourne held a file.
5. As described in J.R. Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen, *A Place Apart*, Melbourne University Press, 1996, p. 110.
6. The Canterbury University College student players who visited Melbourne in 1949. Ngaio Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew: an autobiography*, Auckland, 1966, p. 25.
7. Basil Cottle and J.W. Sherborne, *The Life of a University*, Bristol, 1951. It contained 116 pages and 50 plates.
8. Music, Drama and General Sub-Committee, 31 July 1952.
9. Poynter and Rasmussen, op. cit., 1996, pp. 165–170.
10. Brigadier Irving's Report, Part I.
11. Centenary Appeal Committee, 23 September 1954.
12. Appeal Director's Report Annexure F.
13. *The Herald*, 13 April 1955. All news cuttings are to be found in the Centenary scrapbooks in the University Archives.
14. *Discovery*, 1955, edited by Norman H. Olver. It was introduced by Olver in the *University Gazette*, August 1955, p.72. Two further issues appeared, in 1957 and 1966.
15. *The Herald*, 31 March 1955.
16. Collins Street Independent Church (Rev. Lyall Dixon) to Paton, 19 January 1955; reply, 1 February 1955.
17. Brigadier Irving's Report: List of Events.
18. Paton's correspondence with Sybil Thorndike Casson, David Carroll, Sir Ralph and Lady Richardson, March – May 1955. VC/192.
19. Music, Drama and General Sub-Committee, 31 July 1952.
20. "Vice-Chancellor's Message", *The Melbourne Graduate*, Vol. 6, No. 1, April 1955.
21. "Unexpected Gaiety from Students at University", *The Age*, 12 May 1955.
22. Professor of Natural Science 1854–1899; one of the first four professors.
23. Recipients: Sir William Penney, British atomic scientist; Professor Arnold Toynbee, historian; Dr T.S.R. Boase, art historian; Dr Dison Hseuh-Feng Poe of Formosa; Lindsay T. Ride, Vice-Chancellor, University of Hong Kong; Alexander J. Reid, Chancellor, University of Western Australia; Otto S. Hirschfeld, Chancellor, Queensland University; Sir John Napier, Lt. Governor, Chief Justice of South Australia, and Chancellor, Adelaide University; Mr Essington Lewis, Chairman, Melbourne University Centenary Appeal; Sir Charles Blackburn, Chancellor, University of Sydney; Sir Samuel Wadham, Professor of Agriculture, Melbourne; Professor A.M. Claye, obstetrics and gynaecology, Leeds; Arthur Dale Trendall, Master, University House, A.N.U.; J.A. Prescott, agricultural scientist, Adelaide; J.G. Burnell, Engineering, Melbourne. H.E. The Hon. D.M. Moffat, U.S.A. Ambassador, was too ill to attend.
24. Poynter and Rasmussen, op. cit., p. 165.
25. *The Age*, 15 August 1956.
26. *University Gazette*, November 1956, pp. 47–48.
27. Professor Blainey says that the plan for a continuation of Scott was not raised when he was commissioned to write the Centenary history.
28. *The University of Melbourne: a Centenary Portrait*. Arranged and illustrated by Norman H. Olver, Narrative by Geoffrey Blainey. Melbourne University Press, 1956. Olver to Paton, 31 January 1956 refers to it as 'the illustrated guide to the University'.
29. *The University of Sydney Centenary Celebrations August 26–August 31, 1952*.
30. *The University of Melbourne Centenary Celebrations 14 August to 16 August 1956*.



The invitation to a parade of French fashion held on 16 September 1955, one of many Centenary fundraising events. Le Louvre is an exclusive Collins Street boutique which today, as in 1955, sells imported designer clothing to Melbourne's well-heeled. (University Archives.)