

CUSTODIANSHIP AND REPUTATION: The R.M. Crawford Papers at the University of Melbourne Archives

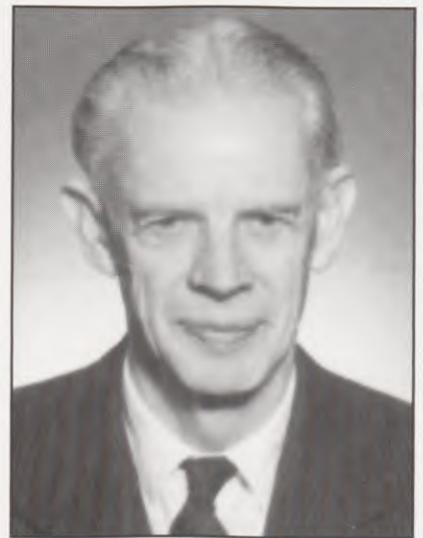
I was given the task of accessioning Professor Max Crawford's private papers at the University of Melbourne Archives in the summer of 1993. The contradictions of his life emerged from the tattered suitcases and boxes that enclosed his correspondence, diaries and papers. Many of the papers and the mass of tutorial notes were randomly stored, but a semblance of order existed in the folders documenting his colleagues, public and political life and his abandoned research. Copious letters, notes, drafts were painstakingly organised in neat folders with succinct titles. It was this apparent clue to Max Crawford's priorities and concerns and his own ambivalence about his experiences that influenced me to write a thesis on him.

I have been fortunate in working on the papers both as an archivist and post-graduate student in the History Department at the University of Melbourne: roles that are undoubtedly complementary but also require quite distinct skills. As an archivist my fundamental responsibility is to retain original order with an understanding of the context and an appreciation of the past. The series were organised according to the significant periods of Crawford's life: undergraduate years, Oxford and teaching years 1928 to 1935, Sydney University 1936; University of

by **Fay Anderson**

Melbourne 1937 to 1942, diplomatic appointment 1942 to 1944, Melbourne 1944 to 1969 and retirement 1970 to 1991. My historical research requires a different level of interpretation and the archival work of arranging and describing was undoubtedly an advantage. I became familiar with the material very quickly and it assisted my understanding of Crawford's preoccupations.

It is a substantial collection, consisting of over 100 boxes, and has proved to be one of the most frequently used in the Archives. But despite this current interest, Max Crawford's profile has faded. He is little known outside academia and rarely read and his influence and reputation as an intellectual has diminished over time and with the dominance of other players. His contribution to the intellectual fabric of our Australian past is confined to his teaching, a legacy that is usually relegated to mere footnotes. Despite Crawford's apparent obscurity there is a wealth of primary source material (particularly the surviving correspondence) that reveals a man who, in his prime, was one of the most prominent Australian public



R.M. Crawford.

intellectuals. He was the professor of history at the University of Melbourne for over 30 years; he shaped the much vaunted Melbourne School of History, influenced several generations of notable historians and was championed as one the great liberals or castigated as a subversive, radical threat. Crawford was also an Oxford scholar, school teacher, prominent intellectual, mentor, the creator of the first historical journal in Australia, ambassador's aide and an inspiring teacher.

Fay Anderson worked at the University of Melbourne Archives since late 1992 and is presently a field officer for ASAP (Australian Science Archives Project). She commenced her Ph.D on Professor Max Crawford in 1994.

My Ph.D is an examination of Max Crawford's life and the events that embroiled him from 1925 to 1963. The emphases are on the foundations and development of Crawford's political beliefs, ideological perspective, intellectual identity and public controversies. It is also an analysis of his changing reaction to the times and the community's expectations of the public academic. This biographical approach is not without difficulties, the balance between narrative and interpretation is problematic despite the rich source material available. The extraordinary letters in the Crawford collection, however, presents other challenges.

Janet Malcolm's intriguing book *The Silent Woman*, sought to expose the difficulty of biography using as her example the mired situation of the poet Sylvia Plath. Letters are the great fixative of experience. Malcolm observed:

"Time erodes feeling. Time creates indifference. Letters proved to us that we once cared. This is why biographers prize them so: they are the biography's only conduit to unmediated experience. Everything else the biographer touches is stale, hashed over, told and retold, dubious, unauthentic, suspect. Only when he reads a subject's letters does the biographer feel he has come fully into his presence, and only when he quotes from the letters does he share with his readers his sense of life retrieved.

Malcolm's assumption that letters are more authentic, more real and untouched is somewhat misleading. As archivists and historians frequently discover, the memory of many public figures have been protected and sanitised by family members who have assumed the role of a custodian, restricting access or worst destroying embarrassing or sensitive material. But what if the process of guardianship and selection occurs at the time the letters are actually written and by the subject themselves? Max Crawford was his own vigorous protector and interpreter. He reinvented himself and his past and very rarely do the letters he left betray this identity. In later life, Crawford would insist that his

family were not political, that his working-class roots were of no significance and he was not a radical thinker. This is a slight fabrication. Born in 1906, he was one of 11 children in a family, controlled by an ambitious mother and a stationmaster father with strong links to the unions. His uncles were Labor politicians and barristers and the family were close to the Labor leader and NSW Premier, W.A. Holman. Max Crawford's intellectual self was constructed around the denial of his early, formative political experiences.

Education was deemed a channel towards a higher status and security and position. After distinguishing himself at Sydney University where he fell under the spell of G.A. Wood, the first of a string of mentors, Crawford made the well worn Australian pilgrimage to Oxford. It was at Balliol that Max began to alter himself and he began to write with a more refined voice. He became the quintessential Oxford man; urbane, approachable, rational, liberal, confident. The metamorphosis can partly be attributed to maturity and opportunity, but it was also a conscious affectation. Oxford offered tireless study and political discovery, it was also an advantage and lifestyle in which to widen one's horizons and cultivate friendships. The letters home reflect this as Crawford began to navigate his own feelings about politics, empire and Australian identity. To his mother he became the willing confidante. To his father he assumed a patronising parental role and expressed his gratitude for Henry's "brave game" oblivious to the real humiliation of working in a quarry at the age of 69 to assist Max's ambition.

There are missing years in the collection; notably the frustrating experience as a teacher at Sydney Grammar, the failed applications and the difficulties caused by the bureaucratic administration at Sydney University in 1936. The episodes of self-doubt and discontent are more obscure; there is a strong sense of destiny that pervades the surviving papers. The appointment of Crawford as Professor of History at the

University of Melbourne in 1937 reinforced the confidence in his pre-ordained fate. He adhered to the example of his mentors, Arnold Wood and Kenneth Bell, and emulated them by providing an "intellectual lead to the department".

In the atmosphere of protest against the Spanish Civil War, Melbourne proved the necessary watershed. Born from a struggling family, his ideas, sense of self, liberal education and teaching found direction. Max began to respond to an environment that buoyed and refined his systematic thinking about historical determinism and provided a platform for organised intellectual and political thinking.

From 1938 he was involved in a myriad of committees and organisations, most notably the Australian Council for Civil Liberties and found himself in a series of very public controversies. Crawford was described by his supporters as moral, humanitarian and just. By his detractors he was portrayed as a subversive radical poisoning the minds of his young and impressionable students. Indeed he rallied against some of the most important issues of the time, censorship, academic freedom and the National Register. It is in this period that a wealth of drafted and incomplete letters were written. Janet Malcolm insisted that the genre of the unsent letter might reward study. In the case of political protest, Crawford's letters suggest he kept them as a form of self-protection, a canny decision because the University Council advocated "extraordinary care" in the public expression of the diversity of academic opinion. In one significant episode Crawford was forced to declare his loyalty publicly, in another at the height of the McCarthy trials he had to assure the American Government that he was not a communist.

Under the combined political tutelage of men in his past and the present, notably Brian Fitzpatrick, Ian Milner and Vance Palmer, Crawford was bolder and willingly more politically conspicuous but his priorities were with few

exceptions, domestic and intellectual. His responses were invariably civilised and conventional. The armour was only ever slightly dented when an individual challenged Crawford's constructed persona.

The issue of authenticity raised by Janet Malcolm is particularly pertinent in regard to the letters and diaries Crawford studiously wrote after he was appointed First Secretary to the Russian Legation in 1942. The thoughts and descriptions are not unlike the journal during the Oxford pilgrimage, they are intensely self-conscious and analytical. Yet it is not such a private and confidential record and the contents suggest that the journal was written for public consumption and as a future reference tool. The correspondence to his wife, Dorothy, and colleague Kathleen Fitzpatrick are also highly contrived. Dorothy was his domestic partner, Fitzpatrick was the intellectual wife.

Crawford apparently indulged in a form of deceit with both women and his intended audience. The correspondence was conditional and at times cryptic. Fitzpatrick was told whether the letters were personal and it was at her discretion that she typed what she judged fit and then circulated the censored sections to those "sympathetically interested". Crawford was unwilling to publicly expose his politics to those who may have disapproved. It was not only political speculation that governed his self imposed censorship, he also intentionally avoided private gossip.

Disillusioned by a series of public campaigns to discredit him as an historian and teacher, Crawford withdrew from political activity. He became wary and fearful and 1950 indicated a very real change in Crawford as he rejected the Melbourne ethos of reform. The dreamer had been destroyed by the public and political mood and a more self-protective, conservative pragmatist emerged. And it was a decade later that perhaps the most blatant example of Crawford's determination to posthumously shape his image occurred with the stipulation



R.M. Crawford and colleagues celebrating VE Day 1945.

in his will to restrict access to all his papers relating to the Social Studies Enquiry. In 1961 he wrote a public letter to *The Bulletin* accusing various members of staff in the Social Studies Department of being communist. The ensuing litigation and the enquiry was one of the most bitter internal episodes and caused an uproar in the History Department. No one is able to view these papers for 30 years.

So it appears that character and interpretation, censorship and invention are some of the more problematic issues of biography and the very tangible challenges of this thesis and indeed the collection. For the proliferation of researchers now examining Australian intellectual history, our prominent historians (Manning Clark is becoming a virtual industry) and the history of the University, this collection will continue to interest and excite. ●