

## IN MY TIME

AN ADDRESS BY THE ACTING UNIVERSITY ARCHIVIST **Cecily Close** ON THE OCCASION OF HER RETIREMENT, 2 JULY 1998.

All long-stayers in the University of Melbourne will feel that they have seen great changes, and few will have seen more than I. Registrars a'Beckett and Bainbridge, covering between them most of the period 1864 to 1937 like me would have seen rising numbers of students, the sprouting of new departments and chairs and the proliferation of buildings to house them, and probably thought how much nicer it all was when it was smaller. During their period development was not steady, and drastic measures might be taken in cuts to salaries and activities, but after a period of inaction there would be a lunge forward. Throughout, the University pursued its educational ends, not well-funded, but for practical purposes independent. In my time, even as something like prosperity seemed to overtake the University, changes were occurring to produce a University which appears in some respects unfamiliar — we hope not in essence but certainly in style.

Useless for me to attempt to outline these changes because John Poynter and Carolyn Rasmussen have already expounded them splendidly in *A Place Apart*, a book which has given me enormous pleasure. Its launching pad, as you will know, was the University

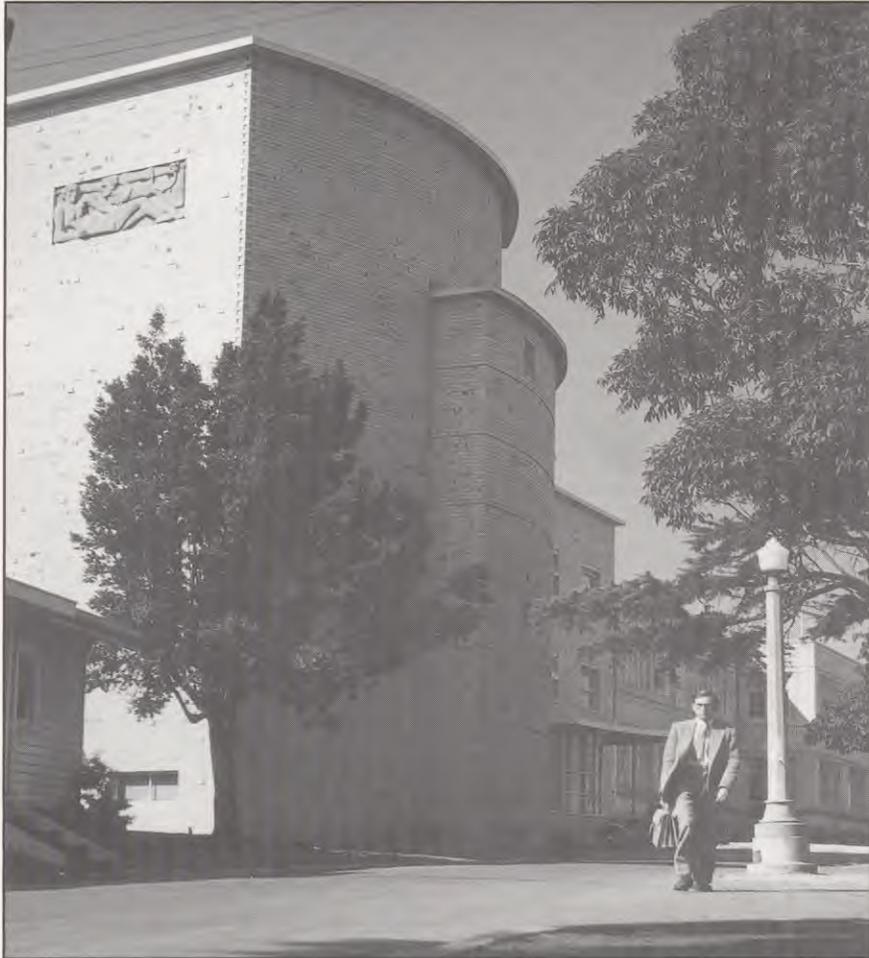
submission in 1957 to the Committee which led to the Murray Report later that year. 1957 is where I came in, but of course I was only aware of some of the developments they deal with and cannot claim to have recognised the import of all of those.

This leaves me free to dwell on more personal matters. The University Archives was not of course my first experience of the working world — that was at 15 when I joined the E.S.&A. Bank as a clerk-typiste, though I couldn't type and, as I felt the trap closing, became determined not to learn (though learning was part of the deal). When school went back in February so did I, to my father's relief. To my verbal resignation the bank manager responded reproachfully "Just as you were starting to be of some use to us", but no doubt he spotted a silver lining.

After a few years in teaching, which at 16 I entered voluntarily though gloomily but which I came to enjoy as I grew up a little, and a trip overseas with a variety of odd jobs and a lot of hitchhiking, I learned shorthand and typing while waiting to enter the University part-time. An office job turned up — that of a filing clerk in a manufacturing firm. Actually, though I did not then

know the language of records management, it involved running a small sub-registry and even involved some disposal. It provided typing practice, brought me closer to the University where I was spending evenings doing French I and introduced me to the pleasures of reading other people's correspondence for a living, which I have continued to enjoy. Soon I learned of a professor at the University abandoned by his secretary and disconsolately doing his own typing. I thus became the Statistics Secretary (Classification Stenographer B).

My time with Professor Belz was exceptionally interesting — it was the first Australian Chair of Statistics and he was building up both the department and the profession by promoting the value of statistics in various branches of science and technology in and outside the University (for example, divisions of CSIRO, public service departments and utilities and industry), and through special courses and consulting. I had not seen a good administrator in action before, or observed an academic at close quarters. I was able to read the Council, Professorial Board and Faculty of Arts minutes as they came in (this was some years before Statistics joined the Faculty of Science) and listened avidly. It was



The New Arts Building (known as Babel) was planned in 1946. This view shows it after completion in 1949 and before two floors were added in 1956. The extension accommodated the departments of Political Science, Fine Arts and Statistics. The mural was removed when the extension was commenced. (Photo: University of Melbourne Archives Collection. One of a set donated by Lady Paton and inscribed "about 1955".)

an excellent introduction to the University. Apart from working among people who thought it natural that I should do a course of some kind, there was the great blessing of three hours off per week for lectures and fees returned if I passed. One member of staff became a life-long friend, Miss Betty Laby, who with her sister Dr Jean Laby became a donor to the Archives of the papers of their father, Professor T. H. Laby. It is good to see them both here.

I had no thought for the morrow, but when in a rare descent to the personal Professor Belz asked me what I would do when I finished I replied without enthusiasm that I supposed I would return to teaching since that was what I

was trained for. He said that he was trained to drive a tractor, but wasn't thinking of doing it.

The idea of working with archives was I think put in my head by Professor La Nauze, who handed me an advertisement for such a job at the University of New England. I did not follow that up, but other connections with the field were forming and the word that there was a job at Frank Strahan's archives reached me. I abandoned another prospect at the State Archives to join him and his other member of staff, Barbara Mackenzie, stepping into the vacancy left by Susan Priestley who was about to start her successful writing career.

A little University material had arrived via the Library (which had once been among the areas of responsibility of the Registrar, who also is responsible for University records) but the chief of the records which Frank soon listed as University Archivist had remained in a strongroom in the basement of the Eastern wing on the quadrangle where the main correspondence series was also kept. When enquiries had to be answered, he or I consulted the records there. The Archives were then more widely known for the business records, a remarkable range of which he had already managed to assemble. My first job was to sort and list the papers of the Wilson Hardy Family — he was a produce merchant from the 1850s in Melbourne, but died comparatively young leaving a family who corresponded with one another into the 1930s. My next major effort was on the Melbourne Steamship Co. records.

My interest in the University records developed in the late 1960s but it took time before their quantity and the demands on them were such that I became almost exclusively engaged with them. They have always attracted researchers, but it was a great lift when the History of the University Project was formed a few years ago. Not only was the first major work soon published (*A Place Apart*), but another was undertaken and numerous other works have appeared or are in progress on University individuals, departments and movements. That was worth waiting for.

Increasing quantity and diversity of records have been major determinants of change in the Archives, but another with momentous influence has been the relatively recent change in technology, for which we must thank the Library. Without it we should have had to wait a considerable time to benefit from computer technology. Even so, it was not accomplished without much frustration and delay, but why should it be otherwise? It was ever so. Take the 7 February 1881 when the University Council received H. Byron Moore's letter asking if the Council would like the

University connected to his Telephone Exchange. The minutes record that this was to be answered in the negative. A second approach from the Exchange in March 1882 met with no favour either, but interest appears to have been aroused. Six months later the University requested the Post Office and Telegraph Department for provision of telephone wire between the University and the City, without cost or future rental, a request which was refused. By June 1883 the Finance Committee recommended telephonic communication between the University and the Vice-Chancellor's house and the Exchange (Brownless was the Vice-Chancellor and he lived in Albert Street, East Melbourne). It was put down for discussion in July but "discussion ensued" and voting was equal, for and against, with the Vice-Chancellor expressing his intention to vote against the adoption. However, Council requested that he not vote so the matter was again adjourned. Three months later, on 1 October 1883, the motion to adopt the Finance Committee's recommendation was passed without further ado.

The University was not particularly quick to adopt the typewriter either. I have reason to think that it owned one before 1901, but it was not till late that year that competency in shorthand and typewriting were specified as qualifications for one of the clerkships in the Registrar's office, then being reconstructed. Typewritten committee reports were soon to be pasted in among the hand-written Council minutes.

The typewriter used by that gentleman was probably not much less big, black and cumbersome than the one I used in Statistics, with some of its less used characters erased to make way for some of the commoner mathematical symbols. Formulas appeared regularly in the notes and test papers I typed, and with no means of achieving movements up and down a half space except by moving the ratchet by hand, even a brief formula required dexterity to produce.

Not long after I joined the Archives

what was probably the University's first electric typewriter appeared for the Vice-Chancellor's Secretary, followed at a decent interval by one for the Registrar's Secretary. Soon they were everywhere, to be overtaken in their turn by electronic models. Copying machines, formerly gathered at a central point so that secretaries would be seen staggering through the grounds under a load of uncollated teaching materials, became standard departmental equipment. Then came computers — at first mainframes to which we were attached by maddeningly unreliable connections and, very recently indeed, the desktop PC. The benefits of these last developments, with their associated software, to institutions in the information business and their clients, are too well known for me to say more, except that I am still dazzled by them.

Another change has been in the archival profession itself. When I taught a course in archives and disposal to a series of groups of (chiefly) public service registry staff in the mid 1970s, there was little easily accessible published material to refer them to: some books only available at the Australian Institute of Management, publications of the American and British Societies of Archivists which Frank Strahan had brought home from a trip and internal documents from the Australian and Victorian Archives, roughly speaking comprised the material readily to hand. Now the Society of Archivists, various archival authorities and students from the graduate schools in Australia alone have produced much useful material as well as writing and debate on current issues.

I am lucky to have seen this and more, but luckier still to have been brought into contact with things of value which are unchanging. There are the records themselves which stand ready to instruct us and extend our own experience. Then, the people. Here I have been very fortunate and regret that I cannot name so many who have helped me though I must mention Frank Strahan who built the Archives in the

first place. By working chiefly with University records I have met people in many departments and administrative sections who have always given friendly cooperation. Through the Library, with which we have now been connected for many years, there has been the pursuing of common interests professionally and socially and the broadening of interest which comes of working side by side with people engaged in related but not identical activities. Through the Archives Advisory Board and the earlier Archives Board of Management we have had the support of representatives of the business and labour as well as the University sectors, and here I should like to remember all the work done on our behalf by successive Chairmen though mentioning only a few — Professors Geoffrey Blainey and Stuart Macintyre, Associate Professor John Lack and most recently Mr Andrew Ray our present chairman. Particular projects, such as a Review in John's case, and the new building in Andrew's, have made great demands which they have generously met.

Then there are my colleagues at the Archives, among whom I include a large number of students and temporary helpers, who have brought such dedication and such a variety of interests and talents to enliven the daily task.

And there are the donors and depositors who have the confidence in us and the future to place their records with us. Sometimes — a bonus for us — they become our friends. There is also the splendid variety of people passing through our doors, corresponding or sometimes simply dropping in for a chat about their research interests and wider experience, informing our work and enriching our lives.

And to come back to the wider University again — there are its lectures, its music, and its other fine collections in the Percy Grainger Museum and art gallery. It is a fine city, and I am so glad to have been one of its citizens. ❖

**C**ecily Close selected these photographs from the University Archives' collections in response to a request from the editor for her favourite images of the University. They are contained in a small album of photographs taken and developed by Doris Hall (later Mrs Doris McKellar) while a student at the University of Melbourne from 1915 until 1919. She studied Arts and Law, graduating B.A. in March 1918 and LL.B two years later. Mrs McKellar gave the photograph album to the Archives in 1975, along with her papers relating to the early years of the Victorian Women Graduates Association.



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 "Mirrored Beauty"



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 "We Two!"

**This page:**

**Above:** "We Two!", Doris Hall and Polly Turnbull (later Mrs Polly Crase) with the east façade of Wilson Hall in the background.

**Left:** "Mirrored Beauty", the Victorian Gothic architecture of Wilson Hall reflected in the Lake (which is now replaced by the Union Lawn and the Old Commerce Building).

**Opposite page:**

**Top:** "Au Revoir — 1917", a reminder that World War I was being fought at this time.

**Middle:** "A Scene of Desolation — Cleaning the Lake", in the background: Wilson Hall to the left and to the right the University's original building, now known as the Old Quad.

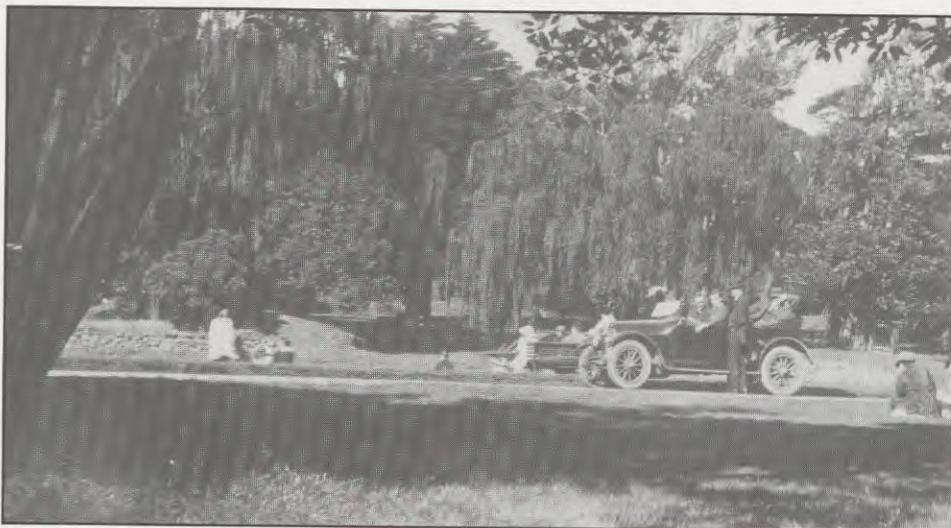
**Bottom:** "In Stew Vac", an illustration of the open, park-like character of the grounds in the first half of the century. Although surrounded by a fence until 1938, the University grounds were used by the public as a park for decades.



"Au Revoir"



"A Scene of Desolation"



"In Stew Vac"