

## Frank Strahan (1930–2003)

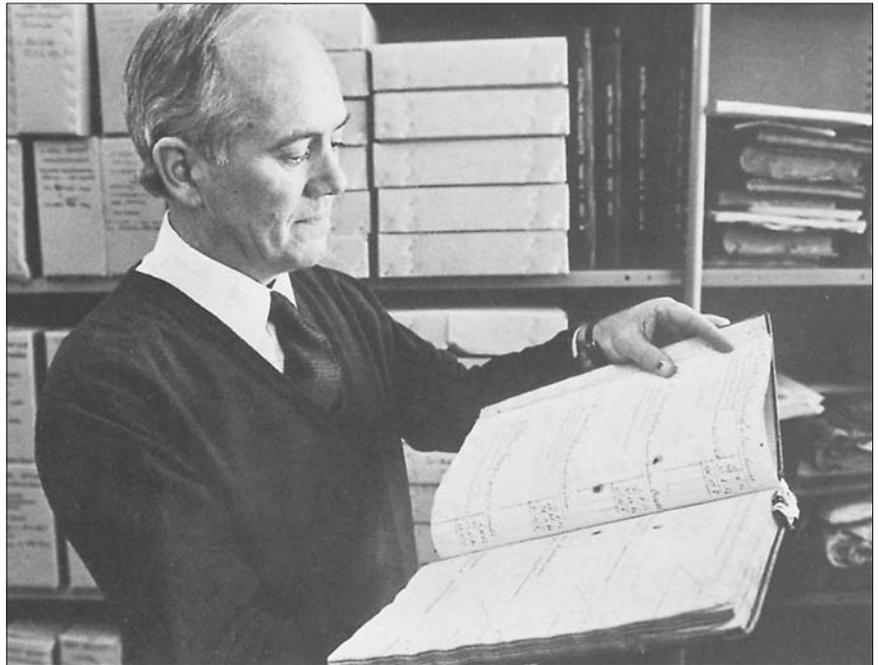
The University of Melbourne Archivist, **Michael Piggott**, pays tribute to the life of the first University Archivist, Frank Strahan.

The foundation archivist at the University of Melbourne, Frank Strahan, died on 17 November 2003, the day after his 73rd birthday. He established the University of Melbourne Archives in 1960, and served in that post for the following 35 years.

In some ways, Frank Strahan was the last of his tribe, and there were times when it seemed it was a tribe of one! There never was, and may never be again, an archivist quite like him.

Judged purely on professional terms, Frank's approach and achievements were special. He established the Melbourne archives at the end of a decade rich in archival development. Archives were established in banks and universities; the first issues of an archivists' journal appeared; there was a visit from the US archivist and Fulbright lecturer Dr T.R. Schellenberg; the formation of a Business Archives Council of Australia, and several critical beginnings in the public archives arena too.

At the University of Melbourne between 1960 and 1995 a collection of university business, trade union and social history archives was built despite lack of adequate resources including proper storage. Relationships with historians, the business community and later with the Trades Hall were forged and a small team of archivists recruited. Many left to establish reputations in related fields, while others, notably Dr Cecily Close and Dr Mark Richmond, served for terms matching Frank's in critical support roles. On the occasion of



Frank Strahan in 1981 at the University of Melbourne Archives in Carlton, holding documents from the Bright Family papers.

the first public 'stock take' of their efforts — the publication of a general guide — Geoffrey Blainey described the collection as 'certainly a collection of world importance' (*The Bulletin*, 14 February 1984, p. 39). Similar appraisal was expressed by the doyenne of Australian manuscript librarians, Paul Brunton, following a review in the mid-1990s.

In building up the collection, Frank also had support from a Board of Management (and later of Advice) with senior University academics and administrators. They strategically cultivated 'captains of industry' who,

because of their background and experience, responded well to ideas about documenting the efforts of business in nation building and wealth creation. Historian-sponsors such as Blainey and others in the University's then vibrant Departments of History and Economic History were also helpful. Frank's direct, engaging style of approach, ability to communicate enthusiasm for history, and readiness to act decisively when collections needed rescue, should also be mentioned. He was a natural publicist, busy long before the phrases 'public programs' and 'outreach' were coined.

He was an old school ‘hunter gatherer’ collection builder who by inclination, necessity and deliberate professional judgement put collection development before documentation. Even so, two of his and his staff’s enduring achievements were the organisation of lists to collections prepared by history students and depositor-funded project archivists, and a general guide. When this appeared in 1983, Professor Stuart Macintyre wrote that archivists needed not only Tawney’s stout pair of boots, but also much more besides.

Their network of spotters must be as vigilant as that of a tow-truck operator, their spiel as persuasive. They should possess the instincts of a magpie, the appetite of a goat, the steadfastness of a zealot in a sea of indifference. In so far as these qualities can be brought together in a single person, they are possessed by Frank Strahan. (*The Age*, 3 December 1983, p. 17.)

For most, the achievements of a lifetime’s career alone justify accolades and honours. But it was several other factors, in addition to his contribution to archives and for which he was made a Fellow of the Australian Society of Archivists, which truly set Frank apart. The first was his personality. He was not easy to manage nor for some, to work for. He had a difficult childhood and by common agreement his family life was often fraught. And as was honestly acknowledged at the memorial function for him at the Carlton Football Club in late November, often he drank too deep of life. Many at the University, at archivists’ meetings, and at his favourite haunts in Carlton and Beechworth would agree. But in their affection for him they were usually ready to make allowances.

Frank would be unrecognisable in the world of today’s cultural institution leaders, in style, dress and speech. He neither knew nor cared for the concept ‘work life balance’, pursuing extra curricular activities during office hours and vice versa. He worked tirelessly for the National Trust, drawing on material in his archives, working through its



Frank celebrating his retirement in 1995 with the then University Librarian, Helen Hayes.

committees and joining campaigns to save buildings and receiving honorary life membership in the mid-1990s. A related interest (and expense) was the built heritage of Beechworth, particularly the restoration of the London Tavern. His other uses of the archives can be seen through a long involvement with the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (a medal honouring his ADB work was presented posthumously), exhibitions, historical articles and book reviews. Readers of *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* will enjoy re-reading his notice of Axel Lodewycks’ *The Funding of Wisdom* in *The Age* of 13 November 1982; but also look for his final creative effort in the recently published *Carlton; A History* (editor Peter Yule, MUP, 2004).

In fact it was Carlton many would argue which defined this Wonthaggi-born, Albury-educated man. He lived there most of his adult life, came to know many of the Lygon Street traders and in particular the owners of Jimmy Watson’s Wine Bar, and was a passionate supporter of the Carlton football club. From the latter came over 30 years of football commentary, appearing after each game under the banner ‘On the Wing with Wacker’ in

*The Melbourne Times*, and culminating in an annual ‘Wacker Awards’ night. The language was unique to Frank and sometimes meaningless even to those who had attended the games he described; his own mix of rhyming slang, nicknames, in-jokes and C.J. Dennis. The club website called him a cult figure. He may well have been, though Carlton is among those Melbourne teams one either loves or hates. His eminent position in the pantheon of pioneering collector archivists, however, is absolutely secure.

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Frank’s relentless search for suitable premises for the Archives since the 1960s remained largely fruitless, with various temporary locations in and around University Square. His legacy is the climate controlled repository in Dawson Street, Brunswick, which was finally made available in the late 1990s, with a suitable shelving system for the 17 kilometres of archival material.