

The University's forgotten people

Researching the history of the Division of Property and Campus Services

Juliet Fleisch

Minding the shop, published in 2005, is a history of the people and events that shaped what is now the Division of Property and Campus Services (P&CS).¹ This Division of the University has an extraordinary range of functions and responsibilities: from campus master-planning to issuing one-hour parking permits; from deciding to demolish large buildings to recording the pruning history of individual trees. Its facilities and services extend all over the State, as during its 150-year history the University has become heir to an astonishing array of properties, ranging from small houses to shops to large farms.

The book however is confined to the Parkville campus, and the chronological coverage is 1853 to 2003. Taking up the commission, I initially assumed that, as Edward Gorey so eloquently put it:

The helpful thought for which
you look
Is written somewhere in a book.²

As a former librarian I thought I'd go to the right part of the library and the archives and it would all be pretty much laid out for me. The people I'm writing about were University employees, and such information is in the University's information

resources, isn't it? Well, no. This article illustrates a few problems and tells some of the stories I was delighted and astonished to find.

Porters, messengers and bellringers

The University was around 100 years old before a Superintendent of Works was appointed to oversee some of the functions of the present day P&CS, and the Division's writ has changed with changing times, but the appointment of a P&CS-type employee followed hard upon that of the first professors. The first salaried employee—the Registrar, Edward Graves Mayne—was appointed in October 1853. The first member of what would eventually become P&CS came a year and a half later. His name does not appear in any published histories of the University and it is impossible to find out much about him, perhaps because his inglorious career lasted only four years. George Smithers was appointed University Porter (sometimes referred to as the Messenger) in May 1855, at an initial salary of £150 a year. (The professors' salaries were set at £1,000 and the Registrar's at £600.) Smithers seems to have been a factotum; early claims for expenses include £7.10.6 for scrubbing brushes, wire, a large hand bell and two 'burch brooms' as well as

payment for cleaning lecture rooms and offices and moving office furniture.³

In November 1855 Smithers's salary was reduced to £120 because he was allowed to live in the lodge at the gate and he was authorised to spend up to £50 to enclose the piece of ground around it and erect some outbuildings. This project was to prove his downfall. On 22 December 1856 Finance Committee heard:

In carrying into effect this object it appears that an arrangement was made with the Messenger who was the occupant of the lodge, that he should supply both the materials and the labor required, to the amount granted by the Council, and should receive that sum in consideration of the performance of the work and to enable him to defray the cost of it. / An account for timber supplied by Messrs Wallis, Owen & Wallis, amounting to the sum of £25.11.0 (for which Smithers sent orders signed in his own name *for the Melbourne University*) forms the subject of this investigation. / Smithers states that upon receiving the cheque for the sum appropriated for this purpose by the Council, he sent amount of Messrs Wallis

Group of seven administrative officers of the University, 1894. Standing, left to right: E.H. Bromby (librarian), F. Gladish (porter), J.S. Robertson (clerk), P. Marcham (bellringer and porter); seated, left to right: J.F.C. James (assistant registrar), E.F. à Beckett (registrar), F.T.J. Dickson (accountant), photographic print, 10.0 x 14.5 cm. UMA/I/1292, Photographs Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

and Co's account to them by the hands of a workman who had assisted him, and that he received from him Messrs Wallis & Co's receipt; which was afterwards destroyed in the fire which consumed the lodge and that he has since used every endeavour, by advertisement and otherwise, to find the man who paid the money. / Messrs Wallis & Co on the contrary deny ever having received payment or given any receipt for the amount; and further assert that they made repeated application for payment and were informed by Smithers that he had sent in the account and that it would be paid in due course. ...

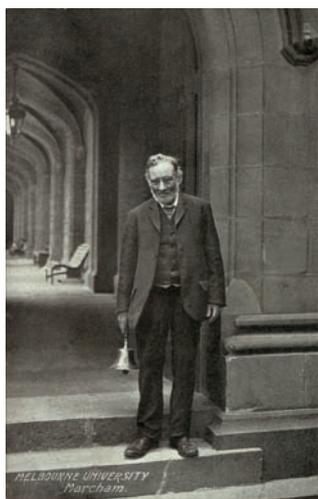
Your Committee now proceeds to a second case—

During the months of July, August and October 1855, a Mr McHutchison supplied articles of stationery to the University to the amount of £3.4.0; and, before the account was paid, gave up his business and proceeded up the country. In the month of April 1856 Smithers having represented that a person who was authorised to collect accounts for McHutchison was in the

habit of calling in the evening for payment of the account, the amount was left out and Smithers afterwards handed in a receipt professing to be signed in his presence by 'Jas. McHutchison.' / Mr McHutchison's brother subsequently applied for payment; and being shown the receipt at once pronounced it to be a forgery. Mr McHutchison himself has since returned and states that he never authorised any one to collect money or to sign receipts for him except his brother.⁴

There were other irregularities, and Smithers was dismissed. Given his short stay at the University, it is unsurprising that his name has been forgotten. What is astonishing, however, is how consistently the names and contributions of later P&CS staff who have served the University for two, three or even four decades have remained largely unacknowledged in University histories—at most they are simply named. I must also plead guilty. *150 years, 150 stories*,⁵ which Peter McPhee and I published in 2003, does not include a single member of





P. Marcham (bellringer and porter) standing on the steps at the eastern entrance to the cloisters, showing the northern wing of the main building, c.1890–1910, photographic print, 14.0 x 8.5 cm. UMA/I/1155, Photographs Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

P&CS staff. It would be ridiculous to try to name every individual, but we might ask why, for example, when the state of the grounds has always been a matter of such pride, anxiety and concern to the University and the wider Melbourne community, a 2005 publication should be the first to list the University's head gardeners. The porters are even harder to track down.

Phillip Marcham (1830–1915) gets into many histories because he is in a famous picture of the administrative staff of 1894, standing behind Edward Fitzhaley à Beckett, the incompetent registrar, and Frederick Dickson, the fraudulent University accountant (see page 27). But Marcham's own story is worth telling and it took a fair bit of piecing together, if only because different sources manage to misspell both his family and given names. He is Marcham or Marsham, Peter, Philip or Phillip.

He was born in Oxford and employed as Junior Porter at Christchurch College. Since this position was available only to single men, he left when he married in 1856 and emigrated to Australia, where he worked initially as a draper. He supplied the dress for Miss McCoy's (daughter of Professor Frederick McCoy) début. *Alma Mater* tells us tantalisingly that his original

connection with the University 'was due to certain of his relatives, who were of the resident Professor's household' without telling us who they were. He also acted as attendant at matriculation examinations.⁶ In 1881 he took up the position of Porter and Bellringer. Universally referred to as 'Good Old Marcham', *Alma Mater* tells us:

Everybody likes him, everybody respects him. Princess Ida [the women students' club] idolises him, he being the only one who has crossed her threshold—and lived ... Though his sphere is not of the highest, that is not his fault, and in that sphere he has done what he could, and can rank with the highest, for they can do no more.⁷

Marcham remained popular among staff and students, and was still working at the age of 82, although bellringing had been evidently beyond his strength for some time, as since about 1902 this duty had been performed by an electric gong in the quadrangle.⁸ In 1912, Finance Committee resolved to pension off this old man who had served the University for over 30 years at a quite generous £60 p.a., leaving him some light duties in order to retain his

connection with the University. It also suggested some cleaning work for Miss Marcham, presumably his daughter.⁹ But Miss Marcham refused, and the whole family disappears from the official records until Finance Committee unsentimentally records the death on 6 September 1915 of 'P Marcham'.¹⁰ There is no mention in the Council papers of the end of an era.

Just six months before Marcham's death, another porter was appointed, who was, like him, to serve the University for over three decades. The tone in which his death (aged only 57) is recorded provides an interesting contrast to the patronising references to Good Old Marcham. In 1948, the *University Gazette* paid tribute to an occupant of the lodge:

One of the oldest and best-known members of the staff died on Friday October 1, after a long illness. Mr Richard Dart joined the staff as Porter in 1912 and became Head Porter in March, 1913. He enlisted in the A.I.F. in July, 1915, and saw service in Egypt and France as a signaller with the 29th Battalion, returning from England in 1919 with his wife. They occupied the Lodge from 1926 until his death.

Administrative and office staff group photo taken in the main building quadrangle near the doors leading to the library and appointments board. Richard Dart is at the extreme left in his porter's uniform, c.1936–1937, photographic print, 15.5 x 21.0 cm. UMA/I/1416, Photographs Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



During his thirty-six years of service he built a great reputation on his reliability and integrity. Those who knew and understood him were aware of an intense loyalty to the University. His presence in the Quadrangle will be very much missed.¹¹

The loyalty was well deserved. Richard Dart had been appointed at £1 per week, a salary which doubled when he became Head Porter. His enlistment was viewed by the University administration with approval and regret, with the

University deciding to make up the 15/- per month gap between his army pay as a Private and his University salary, and promoting his younger brother, F.R. Dart, during his absence.¹²

Dart was one of many head porters and others to occupy the lodge at the main entrance on Grattan Street over 137 years. Now it houses the office of the provost and his staff. The former provost was startled one day to find an elderly couple on the doorstep, who, taking the cottage for a chapel, asked if they could come in to say a short prayer.

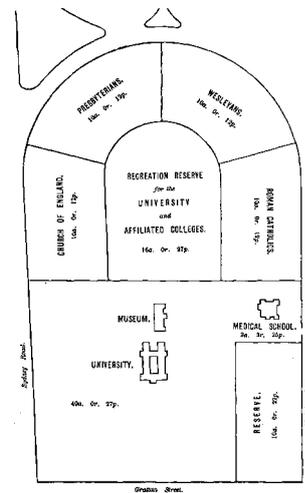
In the 1920s another porter, E.J. Reid, was dismissed, and the record is so detailed that the reader can decide whether he got a rough deal or his final inadvertence was the straw that broke the University camel's back. Reid came to the attention of Finance Committee in February 1925 when his children, left alone in Wilson Hall, amused themselves by sticking pens into the portraits hanging there. Finance Committee decided 'that in view of this episode, but more particularly in view of a tendency to a lack of sobriety', Reid should be sacked. Reid appealed and, on promising to stay sober, was told he could stay, on sufferance. Tantalisingly absent from this account are the reasons for Reid's bringing his kids to work in the first place. Why were they not at school? Was their mother dead? Certainly, the University gave no hint of concern that the offspring (number not stated) of a tipsy man had been left to his care, confining themselves to outrage that they had been left to their own devices in Wilson Hall.

Two and a half years later Reid once more came to official attention. There was a burglary in the Registrar's office. Someone came in, apparently through an unlocked door, and abstracted the key to the University safe from where it was



Left: Portrait of Alexander Elliott (head gardener, 1861–1901) in Masonic attire, photographic print, 16.5 x 12.0 cm. UMA/I/1205, Photographs Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Right: The University grounds, c.1870. *Melbourne University Calendar, 1878–1880.*



routinely stored. This was in the pocket of an old jacket left on the back of his chair by the University cashier. The thieves netted £44.16.7 and Reid, who had failed to lock the door, was dismissed on the spot. The cashier, who immediately repaid the money, however, was merely reprimanded and retained, finishing his employment 20 years later as a supervisor in the library.¹³

Gardeners and a prickly professor

The University engaged its first gardener in May 1856, exactly a year after its first porter. Neither he nor four of his successors were to last long under the dreaded Fredrick McCoy, Professor of Natural Science. I have not found his biography recorded anywhere, so what follows is pieced together from University archives and an article by John Foster.¹⁴ William Hyndman (1822–1883) migrated to Australia on the *White star* with his wife and son in 1855. As early as 5 June, less than a month after his appointment, the University had been obliged, not for the first time, to remind McCoy of the limits to his authority, pointing out:

that the Building Committee employs the gardener to carry into execution the work of laying out

the grounds of the University; that this man is the hired servant of the Building Committee, and not a Porter or Servant of the University or servant of any particular Professor.

But by the following year McCoy had managed to get rid of him.¹⁵ However hard McCoy may have been to work for, there may have been good reasons for dismissing Hyndman, who found new employment in the Carlton Gardens with the Melbourne City Council. These gardens did not thrive under Hyndman's ministrations, and he was sacked in 1870 for ringbarking without permission a row of blue gums in Victoria Parade, before a damning report on his work was written in 1872.

Hyndman's successor at the University, John Clayton, lasted just over four months, following a quarrel with McCoy.¹⁶ The next gardener, Daniel Carmody, died in office, a bare 12 months after being appointed. For the next two years, the gardener was William C. Mortimer, one of a bevy of Mortimers employed in the grounds. In December 1861, he was succeeded by a man who dedicated the next 40 years of his life to the improvement of the University and who deserves to be remembered. Notably, he is the only one of the

gardeners and porters I have mentioned so far to be accorded the title of Mister in the University's records. Alexander Elliott (1824–1901) was by far the longest serving of the University gardeners, but this did not mean a trouble-free run. The son of the steward and head gardener to Sir Thomas Carmichael of Castle Craig in Peebleshire, Scotland, Elliott had studied botany and travelled widely in England and Scotland before emigrating to Australia. Elliott's assessment of the University on his appointment was unfavourable, later recalling it as 'just a tangled mass of wattle-trees and gums. The only cultivated pieces of ground were the borders around the old building—all the rest was simply scrub. The Lake was a swamp ...'¹⁷ The records of the Building Committee certainly suggest that some of the money it had been spending on new plants may have been wasted, as the grounds suffered from depredations by Sunday visitors.

Like Daniel Carmody, Alexander Elliott was still working when he died, but the last part of his life and passing were noted with far more ceremony. In its June 1901 issue, *Alma Mater* printed a photograph of him in old age with an affectionate and respectful tribute to his work. When he died a few months later, *Alma Mater* recorded that:

System Garden, University of Melbourne, c.1866, when Alexander Elliott was head gardener (National Museum and main building in the distance), photographic print, 10.5 x 16.5 cm. UMA/I/1154, Photographs Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



By his artistic judgement and unceasing hard work, he gradually brought the grounds to their present state of beauty, and for all time this life-work shall remain as a pleasing memory of its departed author ... Mr Elliott ... had been in failing health for several months previous to his death, and although scarcely able to walk, owing to his illness and advanced age (seventy-seven years) he nevertheless managed to stick to his post and died in full harness.¹⁸

Elliott was sufficiently well known for his death to be noted by *The Age* on 23 October, but University Council made only a perfunctory note in its minutes.¹⁹ The respect evident in the articles in *Alma Mater* had been hard-won. In 1866 conflict arose between Elliott and McCoy, including accusations that Elliott had stolen plants from the Department of Botany. Council dismissed the charge, originally raised by an undergardener, as 'frivolous, vexatious and vindictive', and sacked the undergardener.²⁰

Charwomen, wages and vacuum cleaners

This then is part of the story of a few of the people employed in keeping the University running. It will not have escaped anyone's notice that

they have all been men. P&CS is still a pretty blokey place, although several senior and middle-level staff are women, and there have been female carpenters, grounds and security staff and locksmiths. During the 19th and for much of the 20th century, women were employed in the P&CS area only as cleaners, and it is depressing to see how hard the University was prepared to haggle over a few pence a week. In September 1926, for example, a row erupted over complaints that the 'charwomen' were being paid only 1/- an hour, while the award rate was 1/8. After lengthy deliberations the University agreed to increase the wages but also add to the women's duties, and it was suggested that the question of using vacuum cleaners be looked into with a view to seeing whether that would reduce the amount of labour involved.

In March 1938, the purchase of a vacuum cleaner for use in the Main Building was approved, and just to make sure it worked really hard, 29 yards of red carpet was also acquired.²¹ In 1939 another dispute arose over the wages, hours of work and annual leave of departmental cleaners: 'After a full discussion, it was finally resolved to recommend that the normal working week be 35 hours for a wage of £2.10.0 instead of the present amount of £2.6.0 for a

working week ranging from 30 hours in a few cases to 43½ hours.²²

Finding out more about the women who enjoyed such pay and generous conditions did not prove an easy task. I tracked names through the papers of Council and its committees, but I wasn't really able to bring their stories to life until the mid-20th century. Then it was easier, because I was able to interview women like Mrs Tierney, who cleaned in the Baillieu Library for 31 years, and whose mother and sister also worked there. Her nephew also worked in P&CS. In the end, I hope my story of the University's forgotten people gives due recognition to the women, as well as its forgotten men.

A discussion of sources

When George Smithers, Phillip Marcham and E.J. Reid joined the University as porters, they can have had little idea that details of their employment history would be enshrined forever in the minute books of the various committees of Council and/or the University's voucher books. These volumes provide a record of employment which is at times almost embarrassingly detailed, showing not only salary information, but also what would today be called 'performance appraisals' and guarded as confidential documents. What

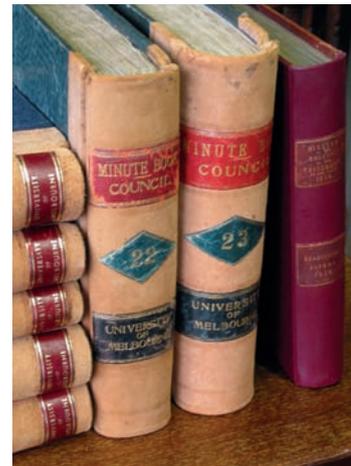
concerned me as a historian however was the differential treatment of the employment records of various categories of staff, discovered during my research. My major sources were the minutes of Council and its committees, which are held in the University of Melbourne Archives; and personnel records which are held by Human Resources. Access to the former was easy. Council documents before a certain date can be viewed by anyone. They are brought from the University of Melbourne Archives repository in Brunswick to the Cultural Collections Reading Room in the Baillieu Library. Later Council documents are under the control of the University Secretary, and held in the Raymond Priestley Building. A letter of recommendation from the then Vice-Principal (Property and Buildings) enabled me to see them. Getting access to the personal files in Human Resources was, understandably, a little harder, but a letter to the Vice-Principal (Human Resources) from the Vice-Principal (Property and Buildings) served the purpose.

I obtained from every person I interviewed written permission to consult their personnel records. *Minding the shop* was intended to be a good news story. While I hope it stops short of being either a sales

pitch or a hagiography, I certainly intended to exclude as far as possible any information which would be personally distressing to any of the people involved, their descendants, friends or colleagues. I was careful, for example, not to include the description in the Council papers of a long-serving staff member, quite early in his career, as 'subnormal' and 'an incubus'. Long-serving staff were not infrequently found guilty of minor misdemeanours, such as filching small quantities of paint or other unauthorised use of University property. Although the circumstances were sometimes very funny, I believed that the distress which could be occasioned by publishing them outweighed their entertainment value. It will come as little surprise that the drinking habits of some staff caused comment. I was rather more cavalier about people who had been long dead and who had reasonably common surnames. It would have been hard to track the descendants (if any existed) of men called Reid or Smithers and I took the view that if any descendants read my book, they were unlikely to be much troubled by what I revealed. I was, however, astonished at the level of detail that the early University administrators included in their recorded discussions. The evidence of Smithers's frauds, for example, is

given in detail in the Finance Committee papers and repeated in *Minding the shop*.²³ Finance Committee was almost as outraged at the revelation of 'a person holding the Situation of a Messenger presuming to sign orders for suppliers on behalf of the University' as they were by his financial dishonesty. The Committee seemed almost to expect swindling from a man of Smithers's class, but his apparent uppityness was too serious a matter to condone.

I got much of the information about incidents such as the dismissal of porter E.J. Reid from the volumes of Council papers, but many employees were noted there only in records of pay; not much to build a story on, so I went hunting in the Human Resources Division. There, records can be seen essentially in three formats: a card file, paper files and electronic files. The card file covers the earliest employees, and for some time ran concurrently with the paper files. None of these cards covers persons still living, but they were very useful in discovering the numerous families with several members on the staff, as they provided home addresses, etc. These unique records concern the history of Victoria in general, not just an important aspect of the history of the University of Melbourne. Fortunately for scholars



of the future these invaluable records are now held in the University Archives.

The later paper files are in several sequences and overlap to some extent the electronic files. For current staff, an electronic record will provide pay and leave information, but applications, references, letters of appointment, reports by staff of visits, accounts of disciplinary action, etc., are generally absent, being located only in the paper files, which are less exhaustive than I had expected, and which will eventually be destroyed under the records management schedules, generally between ten and 30 years after the person leaves the University. This timing varies according to factors such as the seniority of the staff member, whether they were academic or professional staff (academic staff records generally being kept longer and in some cases permanently), whether a staff member was dismissed or there were any legal cases in train, and even to which superannuation scheme the person belonged! Other considerations include achievements such as being awarded University bronze or silver medals or being an artist-in-residence or vice-chancellor's fellow, and whether an employee dies on duty. Records of staff who have made a workers' compensation claim are

retained for 100 years after their date of birth, unless of course they are in the category where they are kept permanently in any case. Given the low classification of tradespeople at the University, I had, when writing *Minding the shop*, reason to be glad that Property and Buildings staff, particularly during the first 100 years of the University's existence, were so often injured on the job.

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Notes

- 1 Juliet Flesch, *Minding the shop: People and events that shaped the Department of Property and Buildings 1853–2003 at the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Department of Property and Buildings, University of Melbourne, 2005.
- 2 Edward Gorey, *Verse advice: A book for recording birthdays and other special occasions*, Petaluma, Calif.: Pomegranate, 2001.
- 3 University of Melbourne, Voucher books, 3 October 1855. University of Melbourne Archives (UMA).
- 4 University of Melbourne Finance Committee, Minutes, 22 December 1856. UMA.
- 5 Juliet Flesch and Peter McPhee, *150 years, 150 stories: Brief biographies of one hundred and fifty remarkable people associated with the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne: Department of History, University of Melbourne, 2003.
- 6 *Alma Mater*, June 1899, p. 55. Special

- Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 7 *Alma Mater*, June 1899, p. 55.
- 8 University of Melbourne Finance Committee, Minutes, July 1902. UMA.
- 9 University of Melbourne Finance Committee, Minutes, 31 March 1912. UMA.
- 10 University of Melbourne Finance Committee, Minutes, 15 October 1915. UMA.
- 11 *University Gazette*, October 1948, p. 83.
- 12 University of Melbourne Finance Committee, Minutes, July 1915. UMA.
- 13 Flesch, *Minding the shop*, pp. 27–28.
- 14 John Foster, 'The Carlton Gardens: The gardens with a jinx', *Landscape Australia*, vol. 4, no. 84, November 1984, pp. 265–275.
- 15 University of Melbourne Building Committee, Minutes, 4 July 1857. UMA.
- 16 University of Melbourne Building Committee, Minutes, 12 December 1857. UMA.
- 17 *Alma Mater*, June 1901, p. 192.
- 18 *Alma Mater*, October 1901, p. 308.
- 19 University of Melbourne Council, Minutes, 28 October 1901. UMA.
- 20 University of Melbourne Building Committee, Minutes, 11 May 1866. UMA.
- 21 Several University committees deliberated on such matters, including the Finance Committee, Buildings Committee and Staff and Establishments Committee.
- 22 University of Melbourne Staff and Establishments Committee, Minutes, 7 March 1939.
- 23 Flesch, *Minding the shop*, pp. 17–20.