Robert Menzies’ early life has frequently been overshadowed by his long and well-documented political career: as a Victorian state parliamentarian (1928–34), Commonwealth attorney-general (1934–39) and, most notably, prime minister (1939–41 and 1949–66). This article examines a significant and largely unknown source of information on the life of the young Robert Menzies: his student and legal notebooks. The notebooks, which represent the most substantial archival component of the collection, are a unique source for the early life of Australia’s longest-serving prime minister. This collection has now been digitised, described and published online through the University of Melbourne’s digital repository.

The undergraduate Menzies

Robert Gordon Menzies (1894–1978) was a student at the University of Melbourne from 1913 to 1918 (LLB 1916, LLM 1918), with a brief and little-known stint as a tutor in 1919. Most accounts of Menzies’ student life have focused on his academic achievements, treating his student days as a precursor to his mature life as a politician, prime minister and statesman. Menzies’ official biographer, A.W. Martin, recounted his subject’s many prizes and academic achievements, including the Dwight Prize in British history and constitutional history (1914); the John Madden Exhibition in jurisprudence (1915); the Jesse Leggatt Scholarship in Roman law, law of contract and law of property (1915); and the Bowen Prize for an English essay (1916). For Martin, these achievements were early signs of Menzies’ ‘drive towards public prominence and leadership’—a ‘triumphal’ undergraduate career that foreshadowed his later success. The historian Manning Clark, by no means a fan of Menzies, noted: ‘From that time he began to entertain the hope that there must be a place somewhere where he would be recognized as a man of consequence. He will find that place: the discovery will bring him great joy.’

Personal recollections of the undergraduate Menzies have not always been flattering. Percy Joske, a friend and contemporary at the university, recalled a gifted young man prone to arrogance:

While Menzies’s attractive qualities won him friends, his habit of denigrating people caused him to be greatly disliked. He became a controversial figure even as a young man. It was not unusual for other people, who may not have possessed his ability but who had to measure up to him, to discover that he had made derogatory remarks about them. This may have led to the statement, afterwards often repeated, that he did not suffer fools gladly.
Brian Lewis, a younger contemporary of Menzies and future dean of architecture, wrote: ‘At the University he was a big fish in a pool depleted of males by the war; most of the males who were there were waiting to enlist at the end of the year’.  

The Great War was the defining event of Menzies’ student life. In 1914, when war broke out, only two of the university’s professors were Australian-born; the others came from Britain, and ‘all rallied to the imperial cause’. The male students were overwhelmingly the product of schools in which the Empire was fervently honoured. Menzies, a graduate of Melbourne’s exclusive Wesley College, was no exception, despite having received a government scholarship to undertake his university study. Military training was mandatory in Australia, but enlisting for war service was voluntary. Imperial fervour inspired mass enlistment, resulting in an exodus of able-bodied and patriotic male students: 1,723 University of Melbourne students served in the war, of whom 271 were killed.

Despite being an enthusiastic supporter of the war and a strong advocate for conscription, Menzies never enlisted for active service. Instead he joined the University Rifles—the local citizens’ militia—and attained the rank of lieutenant. He also threw himself into extracurricular life, becoming ‘a major campus personality’. He served for two years as president of the Law Students’ Society and was a founding member of the Historical Society. In early 1916, Menzies was elected president of the Students’ Representative Council. That year, he was also appointed editor of the Melbourne University Magazine, a role that appealed to Menzies’ organisational abilities and literary interests. It involved writing much of the magazine content, obtaining advertisements and making arrangements for printing.

The Menzies notebooks: their scope and content

In 1976, two years before he died, Menzies offered his personal library to the University of Melbourne. The collection was deposited in the Baillieu Library in 1980. Among the collection of more than 4,000 books are nine photograph albums, dating from 1950 to 1959 (when Menzies was prime minister), plus a set of handwritten notebooks. The notebooks are the earliest Menzies-related documents held in a public collection, and predate the two major Menzies archival collections held by the National Library of Australia and the National Archives of Australia. Unlike those collections, which predominantly cover Menzies’ public life in his political and prime ministerial career, the notebooks are private records.

The Menzies notebook collection is composed of 21 bound items: 19 notebooks and two ring-binders. The series ranges in date from 1913 to 1947. Twenty notebooks date from Menzies’ student and early professional life, from 1913 to 1925. One smaller notebook is dated 1947, and is exclusively concerned with a town planning case on which Menzies was working at the time.

The notebooks dating from Menzies’ student years typically contain handwritten lecture notes, and each bears a conspicuous sign of ownership (see opposite, above). He would typically inscribe his name and the year, for example ‘Robert G. Menzies, 4th yr LL.B. 1916’, and the name of the subject, for example ‘The Law of Procedure and Evidence’, on the first page of each notebook. Some notebooks include his home address; for example, “Lowan”, Rockley Road, South Yarra. Menzies was a meticulous student; the notebooks include few doodles or other signs of distraction.

The notebooks are not a complete record of Menzies’ academic life. Records held in the University of Melbourne Collections, issue 19, December 2016
Melbourne Archives tell us which subjects Menzies studied as an undergraduate. Comparing his enrolment details with the notebook collection, we can see that we possess notebooks for fewer than half of his subjects (the whereabouts of the notebooks not held at the University of Melbourne is unknown):

Two notebooks postdate Menzies’ student days. Dated 1919, these feature Menzies’ personalised rubber stamp, ‘Robert G. Menzies, Barrister-at-Law’, and the handwritten inscription, ‘The Law of Property in Land & Conveyancing: Special Course of 12 lectures delivered 1919 to Returned Soldiers of the Law School, Melbourne University’. Menzies, of course, had not served in the war and did not qualify for admission to a course such as this. Further investigation revealed that the Law School had employed him as a sessional academic in 1919. This teaching appointment was instigated by a massive expansion in student numbers immediately after the war, as returning soldiers recommenced their study in specially convened course-intensive programs.

Although biographers have largely overlooked or been unaware of Menzies’ brief teaching appointment, it is a significant episode in his long and varied association with the University of Melbourne.

Menzies’ early legal career is well represented in the notebooks (see table, p. 12). Menzies was admitted to the Victorian Bar in 1918, when he was apprenticed to the prominent judge Owen Dixon. He became a tenant of Selborne Chambers, the established home of the Victorian Bar, and built a successful practice specialising in constitutional law. In 1920, as advocate for the Amalgamated Society of Engineers,
he won a case in the High Court that proved a landmark in the positive reinterpretation of Commonwealth powers over the states, bringing Menzies ‘sudden fame’ in legal and political circles. Five bound items, of varying length and detail, represent this important period. Two client books, 1923–26, list Menzies’ clients and his fees, revealing a busy and lucrative legal practice. Two bound items contain notes on judgements of various cases from 1924, while another (incomplete) item contains handwritten notes on cases (see opposite, left). The fifth item, affixed to one of the property law lecture notebooks from 1919, contains miscellaneous legal notes and references, a handwritten list of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1923–24</td>
<td>Clients and fees, January 1923 to September 1924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1924</td>
<td>Notes by Robert Menzies on cases and legal subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924–26</td>
<td>Clients and fees [October 1924 to October 1926]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Legal notes on cases, R.G. Menzies, Selborne Chambers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 1935</td>
<td>[Notes on nationalisation of banking, banks, credit, tariffs and other contemporary issues]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>[Notes on cases]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
practising members of the Victorian Bar, and a catalogue of legal texts from an unidentified law library (possibly his own).

One of the client books (1924–26), contains several loose documents, some of which can be dated from Menzies’ time at university. A handwritten poem, in ink on a sheet of paper bearing the letterhead of the Law Students’ Society of Victoria, is a romantic verse including the refrain ‘Nita! Nital’. This work might date from 1916, when Menzies edited the university magazine and was president of the Law Students’ Society (see above, right). Percy Joske recounted: ‘Any claim for Menzies to be considered a poet is based on the verse he wrote for the magazine and so is a somewhat slender one.’

The poem is one of several older documents contained in this notebook. A copy of Menzies’ birth certificate, issued on 28 February 1913, the month before his matriculation on 20 March 1913, is also enclosed.
This particular notebook is among the most intriguing items in the collection. It combines older material from Menzies’ student days, with contemporary documents such as press cuttings and receipts dating from his professional practice in the 1920s. A handwritten sheet of Morse code is among the strangest loose items here.

The notebook collection also contains evidence of Menzies’ early career as a politician, which began in state politics, when he entered the Victorian Legislative Council in 1928. In 1929, he stood successfully for a seat in the Legislative Assembly at the Victorian general elections. Menzies made the move from state to federal politics in 1934. A ring-binder inscribed ‘Robert G. Menzies, Selborne Chambers, Melbourne’ contains handwritten notes and typed drafts pertaining to political events and politicians from the early 1930s (pictured above, with detail). Notes on Douglas Credit, a form of social credit that briefly gained support during the depths of the Great Depression, as well as documents on banking, tariffs and monetary policy, implicate these documents in the tumultuous events that resulted in the formation of the United Australia Party in 1931. Draft notes for a speech, entitled ‘What sound government has done’, match an address Menzies gave in Tasmania in September 1934 while campaigning for the return of the Lyons government in that year’s federal election. This speech represents one of Menzies’ earliest appearances in the federal political arena. It was the same election, held on 15 September 1934, that saw him enter federal politics as the member for Kooyong, the seat he would hold until his retirement in January 1966.

The Menzies notebooks: their significance
What do the Menzies notebooks tell us about the young Menzies? They are a unique archival record of Robert Menzies’ pre-public life as a student at the University of Melbourne and a young barrister in professional practice. These manuscripts add to our knowledge of Menzies’ early life, a period often treated sketchily by his biographers. Aside from the personal recollections of Joske, Lewis and others, accounts of Menzies’ student days have drawn largely on official University of Melbourne records and publications, such as Menzies’ student record card, the records of the Office of the Registrar, brief references in the minute book of the Students’ Representative Council, and the Melbourne University Magazine.

Although the notebooks probably provide little insight into the emotional world of the young Menzies, they deserve further research as a record of the early intellectual influences and thinking of the future barrister and politician. The notebooks dating from Menzies’ early legal career also warrant closer examination. For instance, A.W. Martin noted the lack of detailed information on Menzies’ work in the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration. These records can help to fill this biographical gap.
The notebooks also have a place in the broader history of Australia’s prime ministers, highlighted in the Australian prime ministers website recently launched by the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House. The website brings together prime ministerial collections— including the Menzies notebook collection—from around Australia with the aim of producing ‘the most complete picture of our prime ministers’. The notebooks held at the University of Melbourne provide insights into Menzies’ pivotal early years and are a significant part of this national picture.

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9 Macintyre and Selleck, A short history of the University of Melbourne, p. 60.


11 Macintyre and Selleck, A short history of the University of Melbourne, p. 60.

12 Hazlehurst, Menzies observed, p. 33.


15 Papers of Sir Robert Menzies, 1905–1978, M5 4936, National Library of Australia; Folders of papers maintained by Robert Gordon Menzies as prime minister, M2576, National Archives of Australia; Personal papers of Robert Gordon Menzies as attorney-general, CP450/7, National Archives of Australia.


18 ‘Menzies, Robert Gordon’ [student record card]. 1988.0051, Student Administration (formerly Student Records), University of Melbourne Archives.

19 According to the University Calendar 1913, p. 447, the subject was called ‘ Deductive Logic and Elementary Psychology’.


21 Macintyre and Selleck, Short history of the University of Melbourne, p. 65.


