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Light from the tunnel: collecting the archives of business and labour at the Australian National University, 1953-2003 (Review)

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Light from the tunnel: collecting the archives of business and labour at the Australian National University, 1953-2003 (Review)

Abstract

In May 1986 I was one of a group of 20 University of New South Wales archive diploma students who travelled from Sydney to Canberra for a three day tour of facilities in the nation's capital. Memorably, the bus pulled up outside the National Film and Sound Archive, an art deco building formerly housing the Institute of Anatomy, but now with yellowing posters of Chips Rafferty, Peter Finch and Dad n' Dave lining its walls. Next stop was the suitably imposing Australian War Memorial, where we enjoyed an encounter with original war-related maps, diaries, photographs and memorabilia. The National Library of Australia left the impression of a magnificent new Greek temple, whilst the Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies was a collection of weatherboard buildings, though both facilities contained a wonderful collection of manuscripts and assorted archival material. Our visit to the nation's premier archives of business and labour at the Australian National University brought us to a cavernous and dimly lit space built as an underground car park but never used as such and containing what seemed like hundreds of rows of shelves straining under the weight of pale brown and cream archive boxes. We were enthralled. Twenty years on, a reading of the Barry Howarth and Ewan Maidment edited *Light from the Tunnel* brings forth from the many personal reminiscences contained therein, fond memories of warming to archives as a profession, and of listening intently under that low concrete ceiling in 1986 to a doyen of Australian archives, the white-haired Michael Saclier. Beyond that, *Light from the Tunnel* reveals the often extraordinary effort required in preserving the archives of a nation.

Disciplines

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Twenty years on, a reading of the Barry Howarth and Ewan Maidment edited *Light from the Tunnel* brings forth from the many personal reminiscences contained therein, fond memories of warming to archives as a profession, and of listening intently under that low concrete ceiling in 1986 to a doyen of Australian archives, the white-haired Michael Saclier. Beyond that, *Light from the Tunnel* reveals the often extraordinary effort required in preserving the archives of a nation.

The book is a *rare avis* – a history of historians, archivists and the use of archival records in a unique archival institution, the ANU Archives of Business and Labour, or Noel Butlin Archives Centre. There is much of interest to the labour historian in this book, both in the telling of the tale and in the information offered up about the various collections. *Light from the Tunnel* is littered with names familiar to students of Australian labour history and economic history. Noel Butlin, Eric Fry, Bob Gollan and Alan Barnard feature, whilst Ernest Scott Professor of History at the University of Melbourne, Stuart Macintyre, provides a lively introduction. The book outlines the part played by numerous academics and researchers, archivists and depositors in building an internationally significant archival collection and in dealing with the material in a professional manner. It is a story of success – of expansion of the collection from 1,200 shelf metres in 1972 to 13,000 shelf metres 15 years later, and of building upon the Australian Agricultural Company collection acquired during the 1950s. The importance of that collection in the history of the Archive is made clear, with the refusal of the National Library of Australia to accept custody of it acting as a trigger for Noel Butlin and others, in 1953, to set up a distinct, national archive at the Australian National University for the records of business and labour, outside the confines of the National Library and the Mitchell Library, Sydney. Five years later Bruce Shields was employed as the first Archives Officer at ANU. He was followed over the next two decades by Pennie Pemberton, Bob Sharman and Michael Saclier, to name but a few,

with more than 100 archivists and assistants identified as working in the Archives during its first 50 years.

Light from the Tunnel is also a story of survival. It reveals the ongoing threats to close the Archive down, none more serious than in 1997. Fortunately the active support of the Friends group and the dogged determination of the archivists to resist closure and put the case forward for continued operation enabled it to hold on until the arrival of a new Vice-Chancellor at ANU in the form of Professor Ian Chubb. With urging from federal parliamentarians, in 2001 he put an end to the threat, thereby enabling the Archive to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2003.

Archives are, by definition, records which have been deemed worthy of permanent preservation. Archival institutions, on the other hand, strive for permanency in the face of bureaucratic indifference and triple bottom line reporting. *Light from the Tunnel* reveals the sad fact that the battle is far from over once the records have been boxed, listed and safely stored in the custody of professionally trained archivists. Perhaps the last word should go to Sigrid McCausland, University Archivist at ANU from 1998 to 2003 and one of the organisers of that 1986 visit. She noted in 2003 that the Archive, despite all the challenges, faced the future 'resolutely, confident in its strong professional foundations, proud history and peerless supporters'.

University of Wollongong MICHAEL ORGAN