

FRIENDS OF THE NOEL BUTLIN ARCHIVES CENTRE INC.

NEWSLETTER

No. 55, August 2024

ISSN 1834-0555

Contents

Membership Renewal	p. 1
Bob Crawshaw, <i>Review: 200 Years of the Australian Agricultural Company</i>	pp. 1–3
The Archives in Rockhampton with the Prime Minister	p. 3
Dr John Dargavel (1932–2024)	pp. 3–4
Ewan Maidment, <i>Gunson Pacific Collection transferred to the Pacific Research Archives</i>	pp. 4–6
‘The Most Measured of Historians’, John Rickard (1935–2024)	pp. 6–7

* * *

Membership Renewal

Dear Friends,

This is a reminder that it is time to renew your FNBAC membership for 2024–25 and to consider making a donation to the FNBAC Conservation Fund.

The FNBAC’s online membership renewal form is at: [Membership Application/Renewal Form](#). Bank transfer of subscriptions is preferred. Alternatively, a membership renewal form for 2024–25 is included with this newsletter for those who prefer to respond by post.

Please note that unfinancial members who remain unfinancial as at 1 November will not receive further newsletters.

Thank you for your continuing support,

Dr Maggie Shapley
Treasurer

* * *

Review: *200 Years of the Australian Agricultural Company*

In 1955, thirty-four-year-old Noel Butlin, a lecturer in economic history, discovered that the Australian Agricultural Company (AACo) was moving its headquarters. He suggested that the company deposit its archival records with the Australian National University. As a result, 500 metres of material from Australia’s oldest company still trading under its original name became Deposit Number One at the Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC). This material was and remains one of the country’s most unique collections of business records.



Archivist Rachel Armstrong shows visitor Barbara Crawshaw some of the AACo’s archives.

This year, AACo celebrates 200 years of continuous operations in Australia—an impressive history perhaps matched only by Westpac (originally the Bank of New South Wales), established in 1817, and Sydney law firm Allens, established in 1822.

To mark this bicentenary, the NBAC created a colourful and creative on-site and online exhibition titled *200 Years of the Australian*

Agricultural Company. The exhibition showcases the people, triumphs, and sometimes turbulent times of one of Australia's longest-running and most successful businesses. Through artefacts, charts, photos, station ledgers, advertisements, wool swatches and reports to head office, it maps AACo's journey from Georgian England to becoming one of the country's largest beef and cattle producers.

In the Spring of 1824, twelve men met in London to start a company to graze sheep in New South Wales and sell fleece in London. The group included John Macarthur's solicitor son, members of parliament, bankers, and directors of the East India Company. They agreed to raise £1 million in capital, secure a grant of one million acres of Crown land in the far-off colony, and import fine-woolled sheep from Saxony and the south of France. They also planned to expand into vineyards, olive oil and flax eventually.

In the early years of settlement, sheep were raised around Port Stephens, and AACo later expanded into other areas of New South Wales. Over the decades, it acquired property, feedlots and farms in Queensland and the Northern Territory and switched from sheep to cattle production. AACo is now the country's largest beef producer, managing nearly 1 per cent of Australia's land mass.

In between, AACo managed coal mines and gold mines and profited from land sales that funded its expansion. The company operated Australia's first railway, established the first planned company town and pioneered the export of refrigerated beef. The exhibition's maps, plans, images, architectural drawings and account books showcase the scale of AACo's ambitions.

I am always drawn to the human stories in exhibitions, and *200 Years of the Australian Agricultural Company* succinctly highlights the efforts of the agents, commissioners, colonial entrepreneurs and British financiers who guided the Company through two centuries.

Robert Dawson, the first Chief Agent in New South Wales, had a short and unfortunate tenure. The area chosen for him to establish operations was poor sheep country. Dawson also upset the Macarthurs and other graziers when he refused to accept their old and ailing sheep.



Archivist Rachel Armstrong looks at AACo archival material for the exhibition.

The locals complained about Dawson before he could alert London to their malfeasance, and the British board sacked him. Dawson returned to England to clear his name and later became involved in coal mining in the Singleton area.

Sir William Edward Parry, a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars and an Arctic explorer, replaced Dawson and guided AACo through financially tough times.



An AACo map featured in the exhibition

There followed a succession of seasoned and visionary administrators who managed the business through wars, depressions, and droughts. In 1940, First World War veteran Rudolf (Dolf) Schmidt became General Superintendent and held the position for twenty-two years until his untimely death. His son

Trevor took over and, together, father and son ran the company for nearly fifty years.

AACo's early workforce included convicts and indentured workers from England. Shepherds were recruited from elsewhere in the British Isles, and in 1840, two Chilean muleteers were hired, along with their mules, to transport supplies between outposts. In the 1850s, Chinese labourers built and maintained roads and tended station gardens, and fifty Germans were contracted as shepherds. Aboriginal people worked on properties in New South Wales from the 1800s and later in Queensland and the Northern Territory. They were employed as jackaroos, stockmen and housemaids and, in a unique business practice for those times, received pay and rations similar to those of other European, Chinese, and non-Aboriginal workers.

200 Years of the Australian Agricultural Company is visually rich and presents a detailed and engaging narrative of this long-lived institution. The online element will be a valuable starting point for those interested in colonial enterprise and the evolution of farming in Australia.

The exhibition is available at <https://archives.anu.edu.au/exhibitions/200-years-australian-agricultural-company>.

Bob Crawshaw, member of the FNBAC

The Archives in Rockhampton with the Prime Minister

As curator of the exhibition celebrating 200 years of the Australian Agricultural Company, Rachel Armstrong travelled to Rockhampton in Queensland for 'Beef Week' in May to take the story of AACo to a larger audience.

Thousands of people visited the exhibition there, including Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Agriculture Minister Murray Watt. The event was 'a brilliant opportunity to showcase the extensive and first collection taken in to the ANU Archives in 1955', illustrating 'the ongoing value and importance of the Archives' work in sharing, maintaining and preserving documents that constitute tangible elements of

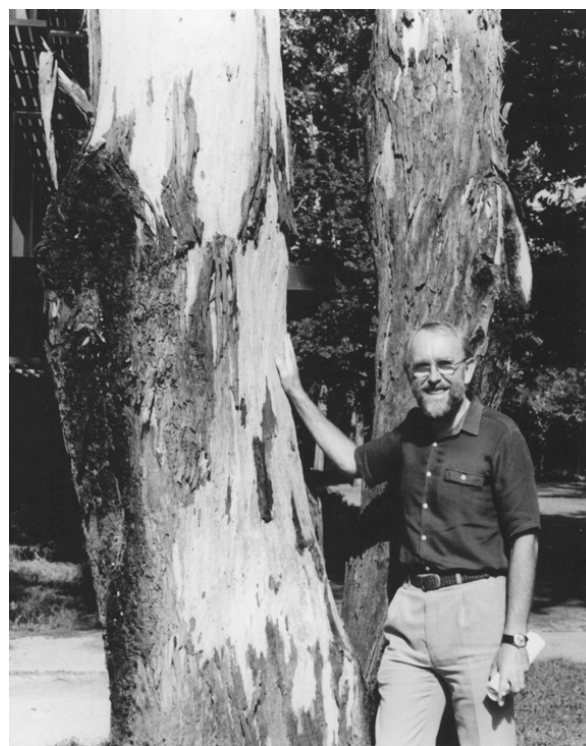
Australia History' (see the full story on the ANU Archives News [webpage](#)).



Minister for Agriculture Murray Watt and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese with the Australian Agricultural Company team at the exhibition (ANU Archives)

Dr John Dargavel (1932–2024)

John Dargavel, a lover of trees and Friend of the Archives, died in Melbourne on 23 July 2024. John enthusiastically served as Vice President of the Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives from 2005 until 2018 when he relocated to Melbourne. John was an Honorary Associate Professor at the Fenner School of Environment and Society in the ANU College of Science.



John Dargavel on the ANU campus, 1985 (ANU Archives: ANUA 226-372-28)

John had a long association with the Archives. In an article he wrote for this newsletter in 2011, he recounted his efforts to track down the records of timber companies. This resulted in several collections of company records being acquired by the Archives, including those of J Wright and Sons which operated from 1853 to 1999. John wrote in the article titled 'Like a rat up a drainpipe I was into the strong room':

I was amazed. There were shelves of ledgers, stock books, staff records, wage books, and records of bush sawmills that had been bought and sold. They went back to the 1860s. There was nothing else like it for the industry. It was December 1982 and I had only come to Altona North for the day, but a couple of months later I was back to make detailed notes ... They enabled me to write a chapter on Wrights in a small collection of histories, *Sawing, Selling & Sons: Histories of Australian Timber Firms* (Canberra: Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, ANU) that I edited in 1988.

John was a founding member of the Australian Forest History Association and his record of publication on the history of forestry is extensive. Two recent publications were a biography of the acting Principal of the Forestry School when it relocated to Canberra in 1927, *The Zealous Conservator: A Life of Charles Lane Poole* (UWAP, 2008) and with Elisabeth Johann, *Science and Hope: A Forest History* (The White Horse Press, 2013) covering three centuries of forest management.

He was also instrumental in the preservation of the records of the Australian Forestry School (which became part of the Australian National University in 1965), now held by the Archives, and was a staunch advocate for the preservation of its xylarium (wood library) which he wrote about in another issue of the newsletter in 2013. John also arranged a visit to the Archives by Phyllis Hamilton, one of the daughters of Charles and Ruth Lane Poole, who was able to confirm that her mother, the designer of the interiors of the Prime Minister's Lodge and the Governor-General's residence in 1927, had also designed and made the Australian Forestry School flag held by the Archives.

Dr Maggie Shapley

Gunson Pacific Collection transferred to the Pacific Research Archives

In July part of the late Dr Niel Gunson's papers and his collections of books, artefacts and pictures were transferred from his estate to the ANU Archives and the ANU Library. An avid bibliophile, Dr Gunson accumulated an enormous amount of published material covering a very wide range of historical, literary, sociological and theological subjects. Also an ardent record keeper and acquirer, Dr Gunson kept his own and his family's records and gathered a fair amount of archives, manuscripts and other primary material, originals and copies, related to his scholarly interests.

Dr Gunson believed that the main concern of historians should be with primary sources and wrote that, 'One of the greatest gifts that one scholar can convey to others is the clean text of what might be termed a hitherto unpublished serial primary source' (*Aboriginal History*, 26, 2002: 224–5). Much of his own work was devoted to transcribing, lightly editing and publishing original journals, diaries and correspondence series documenting early cross-cultural contacts in the Islands and Australia.



Portrait of Dr Niel Gunson by Scott Coleman

Dr Gunson started work on his PhD thesis on 19th century Protestant missions to the Pacific Islands in the Department of Pacific History at the ANU in 1955. He was based in the Department for most of his career since then, specialising in Polynesian ethnohistory and mission history. His key publication in that field, *Messengers of Grace*:

Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre Newsletter, August 2024

Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas 1797–1860 (1978), drew on the original letters and journals of the missionaries, ‘letting the missionaries speak for themselves whenever possible’ (p. vi). His key work as an historian of Australian Aborigines is an edition of the journals and correspondence of Reverend Lancelot Edward Threlkeld who worked among the Akwabal speakers in Lake Macquarie, near Newcastle, *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of LE Threlkeld, Missionary to the Aborigines, 1824–1859* (2 vols, 1974).

Two of the most useful series in Gunson’s papers are the 60 boxes of the manuscripts he collected and transcribed, and the 20 boxes of his own manuscripts which also include unpublished transcripts of primary documents.

Packed and box listed, Gunson’s papers amounted to 332 archives boxes and cartons. They are products not only of his research into Pacific and Aboriginal history but also of his interests in monarchies, Calvinistic Methodism, Gippsland local history, his own family and related family histories, genealogy and heraldry. Gunson’s papers also document his involvements with students, colleagues, scholars, Islanders, the university, the research school and its departments (including good runs of RSPAS seminar papers), *The Journal of Pacific History*, the *Aboriginal History* journal, the Tongan History Association, the Pacific Manuscript Bureau and various genealogical, heraldic and monarchist societies and their publications.



Part of Dr Gunson’s study, October 2023

The papers and books were stored in almost every room in Gunson’s house and in compact, shelving and filing cabinets squeezed into a

basement built by converting the double garage and excavating three cells underneath his house. Most of the books transferred to the ANU were from Gunson’s Pacific, Pacific fiction, Aboriginal, Maori and mission history collections held in the basement. Sixty cartons of theological publications were donated to St Mark’s Theological College Library in Canberra. Some publications were donated to the Heraldry and Genealogical Society of Canberra. Others were selected by book sellers. The remainder were donated to charities or disposed of in other ways.



Niel Gunson’s papers on pallets ready for trucking to the ANU repository at Symonston, 8 July 2024

Gunson’s papers were in six 4-drawer filing cabinets upstairs and another five in the basement and dispersed throughout the house in bound volumes on shelves, some mixed with the books, in box files and archives boxes, in and on top of cupboards, in loose piles on tables and desktops and in open cartons on the floor. Their original order was rarely immediately apparent. Liam Gray and I listed and packed what we could retrieve, including some duplicates, discarding very little. We described them in varying degrees of detail as best we could in the circumstances.

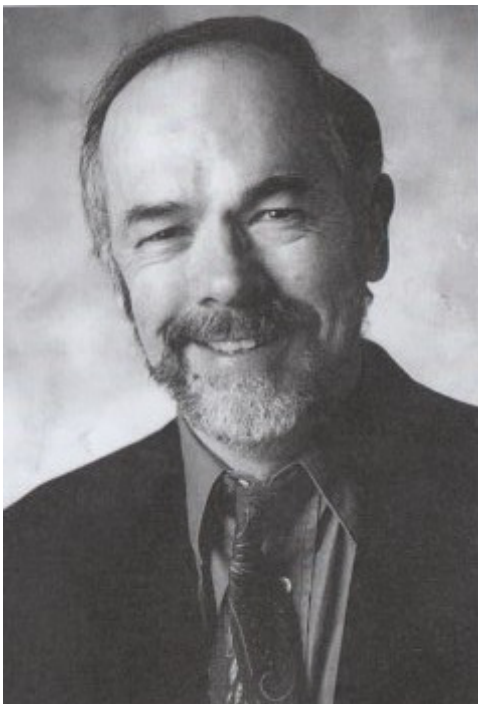
After further processing, Gunson’s papers will be added to the Pacific Research Archives. Established in 2007, the PRA is the third core collecting area of the ANU Archives, sitting beside the holdings of the NBAC and the archives of the ANU administration. Karina Taylor, the PRA’s first Pacific Archivist, wrote that it was established with the ‘vision that it will be the leading Australian resource centre for accessing resources and

information on all aspects of the Pacific Islands' ('Pacific Research Collection at the ANU', *Pambu* 5: 23). In 2007 Karina reported that the PRA had received '26 collections from Pacific scholars and other individuals with an interest in the Pacific Islands' (*Pambu* 5:28). In 2016, Christine Bryan (Karina's successor) reported that the PRA held 'over 150 collections created by scholars, missionaries, colonial administrators, organisations and individuals who were working, or had interests, in the Pacific Islands in the politico-cultural regions of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia' ('From the Archives: Pacific Research Archives', *Journal of Pacific History* 51:4). The current Pacific Archivist, Catherine Ziegler, reports that the PRA now consists of 238 collections. Niel Gunson's papers are an important addition to the PRA as a significant research resource for Pacific and Australian studies.

Ewan Maidment

'The Most Measured of Historians', John Rickard, 1935–2024

John Rickard, teacher and scholar, patron of the arts and an esteemed Australian historian died on 26 July 2024. His funeral was held some weeks later, in Saint Mary's Church, North Melbourne.



John Rickard, 1986 (Monash University Archives)

In many ways, Saint Mary's was an appropriate venue. It was not just that this beautiful, bluestone building had been John's spiritual home for several decades. Or that John had written a very fine history of the church and the parish and community that revolves around it. Saint Mary's also extended the privilege of a Requiem Eucharist to this most loyal member of its congregation. In between the eulogies, we heard hymns and prayers, organ recitals from JS Bach, readings from Revelations and Ecclesiastes. Light flooded in through stained-glass windows, the air was sweetened with incense, and the measured chime of church bells summoned their servant to rest. John, whose great and abiding passion beside History was singing and the stage, would have relished the theatre of the occasion.

Saint Mary's was full that day. Well-worn pews were lined with families and friends, colleagues and students, a gathering of Melbourne's proud gay community, fellow thespians and (of course) fellow historians. John Rickard moved seamlessly across diverse worlds. And he was admired, respected and cherished in all of them.

With the passing of John Rickard we have lost a great historian and a foundational figure in our discipline. John's PhD thesis was a study of labour politics in late-nineteenth century Australia. It was supervised by Ian Turner, a doyen of the Old Left and ardent champion of its social history agenda. But John was too independent and creative a scholar to follow any line of thinking uncritically. He urged labour historians to consider progressive elements outside the union movement or the Labor Party or even the radical left; he recognised a visionary element to much nineteenth-century liberalism, and he understood – as Graeme Davison astutely observed in his own tribute that day – that historical actors must be judged in their own right rather than through the prism of the time we live in.

Class and Politics (the book that emerged from John's PhD) was based on a formidable bedrock of sound historical research. It drew extensively on arbitration transcripts, union minutes and employer records. John, like EP Thompson before him, invited us to consider class as a relationship not a thing – labour and capital could not be understood in isolation from each other. As such it is not surprising that John Rickard was a friend and supporter of the Noel Butlin Archives. He valued a

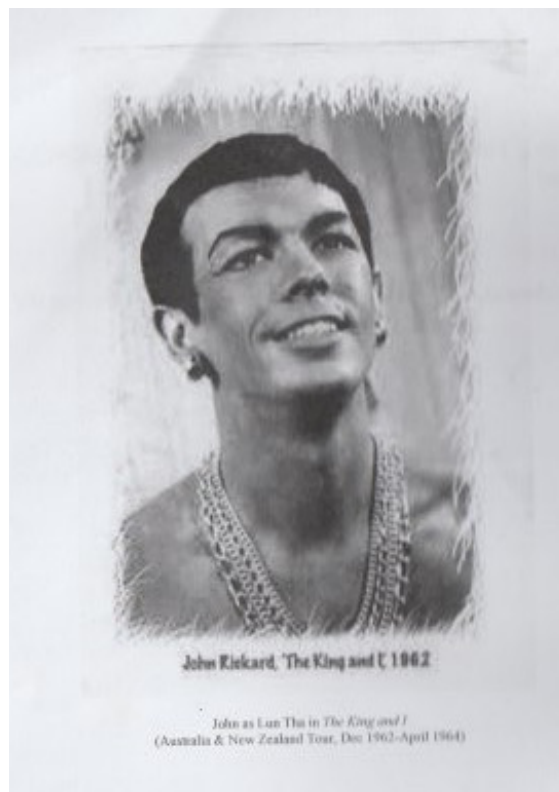
collection that cared for both the archival record and material culture of the past and he was acutely aware of the need to preserve labour heritage for past and future generations.

John's contribution to our discipline did not end there. A stream of highly-regarded publications followed *Class and Politics*, each exploring new fields and pioneering exciting new methodologies. Psycho-history informed his sensitive rendering of the Deakins homelife, as it did his subsequent self-reflexive work on his own family's history. *HB Higgins: The Rebel as Judge* is one of the finest examples of historical biography I've read. An ambitious social history through the frame of one man's life, it skilfully untangles the private from the public man. With Peter Spearritt, John Rickard also charted the emergence of public history in Australia. *Packaging the Past* remains a thought-provoking inquiry into the material culture of the past and the complicated nexus between history, memory and heritage. Perhaps his best-known work, *Australia: A Cultural History* was awarded the coveted Ernst Scott prize in 1988. Brimming with empathy and insight, it bears all the hallmarks of an accomplished historian.

As a young postgraduate student, I was privileged to preview *Australia: A Cultural History* in the classroom. John Rickard's understanding of 'culture' was as open and expansive as Raymond Williams's (a masterful wordsmith he never tired of citing). For John, culture was not the elite accomplishment of the privileged few but a way of life grounded in community and expressed through a myriad of practices and institutions. This urbane and elegant man, the 'product' of what he called an Imperial Family, was also fiercely democratic in spirit. John was a people's historian, his readable, engaging work always accessible.

John Rickard spent his entire academic career at Monash University where he nurtured a compassionate and collegial culture. All who were taught or supervised by him there found him critical but supportive, generous to a fault, a confident intellect bereft of any intellectual arrogance. And we will all remember, with no small measure of fondness, his immense sense of fun. How many lectures on Australia in the 1950s ended with a

rousing rendition of 'I'm a Happy Little Vegemite'? Just imagine the delight of his surprised and spellbound audience.



Steeped in ceremony and rich in ritual, the Requiem Eucharist at Saint Mary's underscored the spiritual side of John's life. John's faith, we were told, was a fragile thing, but fragile things are often the most precious. Precious too is our memory of this kind and generous man, this wise and encouraging teacher, this most measured of historians. We are all so much the poorer for his passing.

Bruce Scates

**Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives
Centre Inc.**

Contact Details

Postal address: c/o ANU Archives,
R.G. Menzies Building, 2 Fellows Road,
Australian National University, Canberra ACT
2600, Australia.

Phone: c/o NBAC (02) 6125 2219

Email: <nbac.friends@gmail.com>