

# FRIENDS OF THE NOEL BUTLIN ARCHIVES CENTRE INC.

# NEWSLETTER

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### **Annual Lecture by Diane Kirkby — Vote of Thanks from FNBC Chair Bruce Scates**

On 21 March, Professor Diane Kirkby presented the Annual Lecture for ANU Archives and the Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. Professor Kirkby's lecture was titled 'Here to Stay! Militancy and Longevity in Australia's Maritime Labour History'. FNBC Chair Bruce Scates shared this Vote of Thanks for Professor Kirkby's lecture:

As we come to the close of this evening's event it's my immense privilege to move a brief vote of thanks — on behalf of the Friends and indeed on behalf of all of you gathered here today.

Before I do so, I too would like to acknowledge that I stand on what always was and always will be Aboriginal country. Di has reminded us of the Maritime unions' support for a host of First Nations' causes. It seems appropriate we acknowledge that Aboriginal sovereignty is also 'here to stay'. And we all say YES to that.

I would also like to acknowledge the presence of the Maritime Union of Australia here today, Mr Warren Smith, the Deputy National Secretary of the MUA and Dr Penny Howard, the Union's National Research Officer. Warren, Penny, this is Australia's National University and we are in many ways a keeper of the nation's memory. Our archives would be incomplete — would be impoverished — without the records of your union, and the living testimony of the community those records represent.

So, with the University Archivist, Kathryn Dan, and the University Librarian, Roxanne Missingham, the Friends of the Noel Butlin thank you for the privilege of caring for this heritage, a heritage we treasure and we are proud to share.

Someone very familiar with those records is one of our distinguished patrons, Professor Joy Damousi, who also joins us today. Joy's PhD thesis charted Women's struggles in the labour movement, struggles (as Warren has reminded us) that the MUA has embraced. Joy's first book, with the wonderful, MUA-style title, 'Women Come Rally', drew extensively on the records of the Butlin Archives and this archive will continue to facilitate such original and challenging scholarship — scholarship in service of the community. The Friends are fortunate enough to have four Patrons, ensuring we connect with the labour movement, and the wider community as well as the academy: Ros Kelly AO, Canberra's former representative in Parliament and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women in the Hawke Labor Government; John Faulkner, former Senator for NSW, a cabinet member in the Keating, Rudd and Gillard governments and my former colleague on the National Archives Advisory Board; and Professor Simon Ville, a former Butlin lecturer who now occupies the Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard. Ros, John and Simon all send their apologies. We acknowledge their support for the Archives this evening.

Di cited the words of Ian Turner tonight, one of the foundation figures in Australian labour history. Labour history that, Ian often told his students at Monash, is history from the bottom up. It is not the story from above, the story of the privileged elites that so often dominate the historical record. It is the story of ordinary people and what Di has done tonight, through both the spoken word, and those compelling images, is to recover and to celebrate their voices. That image of Indian seafarers, looking back at us with that 'cargo of grievance', will remain with many of us long after tonight.

Those voices, those images, resound across the 150 years of the MUA's history — from the majestic age of the sailing ship, through to massive, steam-powered vessels and the technologically sophisticated voyaging of today. And those voices were made strong, in every epoch of the union's long history, by political activism and worker solidarity. As Di put it so eloquently, maritime labour was 'deeply rooted in industrial militancy'. And she has told us why. 'Theirs is more

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than just a job. It is a way of life in which union membership is inseparable from their identity as world citizens.'

Di showed us tonight how the union's commitment to a socialist vision of world peace and democracy, combined with strong and continuous leadership, made the MUA a distinctive force in the Australian industrial and political landscape. In their struggles to replace harsh conditions with safe and liveable workplaces, with financial security, with decent remuneration, the Union fought for principles of equality, democracy and social justice for all workers and all people. They rejected what she called 'the oppressive language' of the masters, they asserted the dignity of labour at sea, and the wharves and beyond.



Wharfies unloading copra at Lever Bros Works, Balmain, New South Wales, c. 1952. Photo NBAC (N163-15-173).

The Union fought its battles on many fronts. Di emphasised tonight the long campaign against 'Flags of Convenience' and offered us a nuanced critique of the same. But she's also explained how maritime unions led the struggle against apartheid in South Africa and the campaign to end the war in Vietnam. Di surveyed the struggle to empower Indigenous Australians, and the support the union gave to the independence movement in Indonesia and throughout the region.

We often think of twentieth-century Australia as being first and foremost a White Australia. I think Di's lecture offered us a corrective tonight to that narrow and insular vision. She has shown us how the union challenged dominant racist attitudes and attempts by shipowners to use racial differences to drive down

wages and conditions for all. In a world where capital (as she put it) had no country, the MUA believed it was important that there was no colour bar in the union and they forged international connections right across the globe.

So what we have heard tonight is more than the story of one great Australian union — it is a story that transcends race and gender, that reaches across the globe, that speaks to us all.

Thank you Di for the privilege of sharing that history from below.

As union officials, Warren and Penny know all about custom and practice. So too do historians. It is time honoured custom and convention that the friends of the Noel Butlin present our distinguished speaker with a gift. And what better gift for a labour historian could there be than a book about a labour politician. In this case, Margaret Simons' enthralling biography of Tanya Plibersek. We hope you enjoy this book as much as we enjoyed your lecture this evening, Di. And we thank you again for your fellowship.

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### Chairperson's Report 2022

This report was given at the 2022 AGM. Professor Scates began by acknowledging that the land we gather on always was and always will be Aboriginal Country. He noted that we respectfully acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, their elders and descendants, past and present, emerging and enduring. He next summarised the membership of the Friends, the year's activities, and highlights.

Beginning with membership, the Friends currently have 75 members, including three new members since the last AGM: the Australian Society of Archivists, the Alan Reid Institute, and Brenda Croft (Professor of Indigenous Art History & Curatorship, ANU), who has just been awarded the Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser Chair of Australian Studies at Harvard University for 2023–2024).

Voluntary work is the social glue that binds our community together. We acknowledge and thank those who served on the Friends' committee in 2022, its officers and committee members and our auditor, Betty Ferguson. We are also grateful to John Myrtle, who resigned at the last AGM having served on the Committee since 2017, and to Bob Crawshaw who will not stand again at this AGM, having worked on the Committee in 2021 and 2022.

The Committee met in February, April, June, August and October — all online meetings via Zoom, except the April meeting which was hybrid. Kathryn Dan, the University Archivist, attends every Committee meeting ex-officio. The Friends are very grateful to Kathryn for kindly hosting this AGM and the other Friends' meetings held during the year and to the ANU Library's Comms team that graciously assists her.

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Professor Rae Frances, a great supporter of the NBAC, retired from her position as Dean of the College of Arts and Social Sciences, ANU, in November. Rae delivered the first FNBAC Annual Lecture, *Confessions of a Promiscuous Researcher*, in 2002.

The position of Patron has remained vacant since Professor Stuart Macintyre passed way shortly before our last AGM. This AGM will consider the Committee's proposal to elect several eminent people who have graciously agreed to take on that role.

Geoffrey Luck, an esteemed FNBAC member, also passed away last year. He was an ABC radio journalist originally in Queensland and in PNG from 1957 to 1967, and later in Northern Ireland and London. Some of Geoffrey's professional papers are deposited at the NBAC.

Regarding the Friends' activities during the year, the Conservation Fund Committee, consisting of Colleen McEwen (Convenor), Carol McNally, Professor Mark Wilson and Associate Professor Keturah Whitford, both from the ANU College of Business and Economics, continued its activities. Two early trade union minute books were repaired and conserved: the NSW Confectioners' Society minute book, 1889–1892 (Ref: NBAC N194-9) at a cost of \$880, and the Professional Musicians Association of Australia minute book, 1904–1907 (Ref: NBAC T7/1/3) costing \$2,970.

Thanks to Colleen's efforts, the FNBAC was registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC), which maintains the Conservation Fund's charity status.

In addition, driven by Bob Crawshaw, the Friends began a recruitment and donation letter-writing campaign aimed initially at trade unions which, though unsuccessful so far, has at least enhanced our public profile.

Another main activity was a panel session at the last AGM where Eleanor Foster and Freya Willis spoke about their research work and the records that they used in the NBAC. Referring to Australian Agricultural Company archives, Eleanor gave a well-illustrated analysis of the ways in which Aboriginal people were brought into — and excluded from — new colonial economies. Freya made dexterous use of ACTU archives in her talk on the changing patterns of women's participation in trade unions in 1970s Australia.

The *FNBAC Newsletter* (nos.50 & 51) were issued in June and September. The June issue mainly consisted of reports from the 2021 AGM. It included a summary of the talks given by Eleanor Foster and Freya Willis, and an obituary for Professor Macintyre focusing on his support for archives in Australia and in particular his support for the NBAC.

The September issue was mainly devoted to an abridged version of Anthea Hyslop's 2021 FNBAC Annual Lecture, *Records and Recollections: The*

*Pneumonic Influenza Pandemic in Australia, 1918–1919.*

The last issue of the *Newsletter* for 2022 (no.52) is expected to be published in December. Text-searchable digital copies of back issues of the *Newsletter* are held by the NLA and are accessible via Trove.

Professor Marian Quartly (Monash University) delivered the 21<sup>st</sup> NBAC Annual Lecture, *Friendly Society or force for nationalism? The Australian Natives Association 1871–1901*, in-person on 26 October in the Auditorium in the new RSSS building at the ANU. About 50 people attended the lecture and enjoyed the refreshments after it. A video recording of Professor Quartly's lecture is accessible on the ANU Archives website.

Last week, Di Kirkby's history of the Maritime Union of Australia, *Voices from the ships: Australia's seafarers and their union*, was co-launched by Rae Frances and Paddy Crumlin, MUA National Secretary, in the Melbourne Trades Hall. Paddy stated that the union movement prevails because of its collective efforts. So might ours!

*Professor Bruce Scates, Chair FNBAC*

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### ANU Archives Annual Report 2022

**Highlights:** The ANU Archives continues to build and make available collections of national research significance. Important records of companies and friendly societies have been made accessible this year and the Archives has engaged successfully with academics and through exhibitions.

**Staff and operations:** The Noel Butlin Archives Centre reading room re-opened to researchers on 8 November 2021, following the second 2021 stay at home period due to COVID. Since that time researcher numbers have steadily increased with usage approaching pre-COVID levels.

The reading room will close to researchers during the University shutdown period (24 December–2 January).

Staffing numbers have been stable in 2022, though we manage with extended staff absences from time to time. Occasional volunteers have contributed to special projects for some of the year. The Archives hosted a student intern from the Heritage and Museum Studies course. He completed work for assessment including a report on the placement and practical work on improving access to collections in National AIDS Archive.

**Research use:** Usage has returned to levels comparable to the period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and other disruptions of the past two years. As at 31 October 2022, the number of archives users was 1070 and the items used was 17,691. This compares favourably with 2021 figures of 959 users (+10%) and 14,350 items used (+19%). It is reassuring to see steady research use from Australia and overseas, with an

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increase in enquiries from PhD students, academic researchers, and the regular flow of local and family history requests. Reference enquiries included a number of requests for permission to use material in publications, exhibitions, documentary films and TV series.

Archives staff are progressively updating and adding to subject guides and finding aids for the archives using a template in line with guides published by the Library. Guides published in this format to date are:

[Australia - Indonesia relations, 1945–1949](#)

[Australia in World War II, 1939–1945](#)

[Family history sources in the University Archives](#)

[Records about gold mining](#)

Seeking to support new audiences, the Archives commenced contributing digitised collections to the JSTOR service as part of the Library's contribution. JSTOR is a major research resource internationally, providing access to published and primary source material in digital form. The JSTOR [Collections](#) service is exposing digitised archives to new research audiences. Material from the following collections are included:

- Amirah Inglis (Spanish Civil War)
- ANU Reporter
- Bruce Stinear photographs
- Burns Philp photographs
- Minute books of pre-Federation Australian trade unions
- Sydney Stock Exchange registers

Archives staff provided support for learning and teaching through presentations on archival literacy to HIST3007 Making History students, and on Pacific archives to the workshop *Pasifika Perspectives on the History of Archaeology*, 26–28 October.

**Collection management:** Archives staff completed processing of several large collections in 2022 and made them accessible via the AtoM database. They included:

- The records of several Friendly Societies, including Australian Natives Association and Manchester Unity
- AMP Limited (founded as the Australian Mutual Provident Society in 1849). While of significant value, the AMP did destroy many of its archives over the years. Records documenting their Circular Quay building were donated to the National Trust.
- Gareth Evans' papers
- Justice Paul Munro's papers from the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, Australian Industrial Relations Commission, Industrial Relations Society, Australian Institute of Employment Rights and the Papua New Guinea Association of Australia
- Mavis Robertson's papers on labour activism and introduction of superannuation
- Peter Hall (Statistician)
- CFMEU (ACT Branch)
- Drill Hall Gallery visitors books

- Papers of Indonesia specialist Emeritus Professor Anthony Reid

Storage space continues to be under pressure with natural annual growth in the Archives.

**New accessions:** In 2022 the Archives received records in the following collecting streams:

Noel Butlin Archives Centre

- AMP
- Addition to The Institute of Brewing – Asia Pacific Section
- Barbara Curthoys' papers on the Union of Australia Women

National AIDS Archive

- David Buchanan SC – records documenting his membership of NACAIDS (National Advisory Committee on AIDS) particularly concerned with discrimination

Pacific Research Archive

- Jack Golson's collection of rare offprints
- Papers of Ralph Bulmer, anthropologist and pioneer of ethnobiology via colleague Andrew Pawley. Discussions continue about Andrew Pawley's papers
- Papers of Matthew Spriggs on Pacific anthropology

University Archives

- ANU 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Time Capsule. The ANU75 Closing Ceremony celebrated the bringing together of items for the time capsule. <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/anu-turns-75>
- Ann Curthoys' papers on Women's Studies at the ANU
- assorted photographs and film reels from the College of Asia and the Pacific
- photographs from former ANU student Fred Reinke

**Public events and exhibitions:** Professor Emerita Marian Quartly from the Monash University School of Philosophical, Historical and International Studies delivered the 2022 ANU Archives Annual Lecture on 3 November. Thanks to the Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre for supporting the event. Professor Quartly's topic was *Friendly society or force for nationalism? The Australian Natives Association 1871–1901*. The in-person event was well attended and provoked interesting discussion.

Archives staff curated exhibitions in the Noel Butlin Archives Centre reading room to continue celebration of the University's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary: 'People of ANU' (February–May) and 'Student life' (May–September).

'Marie Reay in Papua New Guinea: exploring cultures through objects', a joint exhibition by the School of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Archives, was extended from May until mid-November and continues to be available online.

Under the leadership of Dr Lauren Richardson, the Japan Institute in collaboration with the Menzies library hosted an exhibition from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in the foyer. The exhibition panels

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were supplemented with a display of publications from the Library's Asia-Pacific collections together with posters, badges and documents from the Archives relating to anti-nuclear and peace movements, and international relations. Material from the Hon. Professor Gareth Evans' papers were included. Professor Evans spoke at the [exhibition launch](#) on 6 September, along with Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific, Professor Helen Sullivan, atomic bomb survivor, Ms Yoshiko Kajimoto, and University Librarian, Ms Roxanne Missingham. Visits to this exhibition were included in teaching by academics from the Coral Bell School. The exhibition, which was due to close on 30 November, was extended for a few days to be included in the College of Asia and the Pacific event *Immersia: Engage with the Pacific and Asia, 1–3 December*.

The exhibition being installed for the end of the year and early 2023 will commemorate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of waterside workers and maritime unions.

Material from the Archives also supported the 'ANU Press celebrates 1000 titles' exhibition held in the Menzies foyer (March–May). Archives and Library staff mounted a small display on Queen Elizabeth II including the Visitor's Book from opening of the Menzies Library together with the desk and chair used by the Queen.

The Archives participated in Alumni Week (28 March–2 April) by hosting Tunnel tours (Acton Underhill) and a Curator's talk about the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition.

**Projects:** The digital humanities project to make digitised Sydney Stock Exchange Registers available as data, being worked on by Tim Sherratt, has resulted in a new research resource for academics in the field. Frank Liu delivered a paper based on the data, 'Trading Activity and Sentiment on the Sydney Stock Exchange 1901–1950', to the Economics and Business History Network in early November. More information on this project is available at <https://glam-workbench.github.io/anu-archives/>

The Archives continues to work with the Digital Scholarship team on digitisation projects. Significant resources added to the Open Research repository include:

- approximately 4,000 photographs relating to a wide variety of trade unions, professional associations and Australian companies, dating from the 1850s to 1960s
- architectural maps and plans relating to Lake George Mines Ltd. These plans provide insight into the planning and workings of one of the largest metal mining operations in Australia, at Captains Flat New South Wales, between 1892 and 1962
- James Squire's Brewery ledger, historically significant, the ledger includes details of orders placed with Squire's Brewery from 1828–29 and

names of many prominent early European settlers of the greater Sydney region.

Significant work has been done to identify audio-visual and vulnerable format material for priority copying as part of the broader SIS project.

*Kathryn Dan, University Archivist*

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### Conservation Report December 2023

This report covers the period from the 7 December 2021, the date of the last AGM, until the date of this report.

A Conservation Fund was established in February 2009 with the aim of supporting the restoration, repair and stabilisation of fragile records in the Noel Butlin collection. The Fund gave the Friends a new direction, supporting the first object set out in the Constitution: '...to help preserve and extend the Noel Butlin Archives Centre'.

In 2011 the Fund was formally listed on the Register of Cultural Organisations (ROCO) and became a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) under Section 30F of the *Income Tax Assessment Act*, allowing donors to receive an income tax deduction for donations over \$2. As explained at last year's AGM, the Friends were required to register as a charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission (ACNC), which was approved in March this year. Registering as a charity has allowed the Fund to keep its Deductible Gift Recipient status with the Australian Tax Office.

The Conservation Fund is managed by a committee with members Professor Mark Wilson and Associate Professor Keturah Whitford from the ANU College of Business and Economics, the Friends Committee member, Carol McNally and myself as administrator. I would like to thank Mark, Keturah and Carol for their continued support.

As well as allocating money from the formally established Conservation Fund to restore collection records, surplus money from the Friends General Account is also used to restore items.

During the year the Friends Committee launched a program to approach selected unions, where the Archives hold their records, or the records of predecessor unions, to join the Friends and contribute to the Conservation Fund. To date four invitations have been sent to the Manufacturing Division and the Maritime Union Division of the CFMMEU, to the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) in August and October. To date no responses have been received.

Since 2009 \$31,246.70 has been allocated for the restoration of 32 records from the collection primarily focusing on pre-Federation Australian trade union minute books listed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. This amount includes money donated to

the first Conservation Fund 2009–2011 \$4,443; the formally established Conservation Fund 2011 to date \$19,433.70; and surplus money directed from the Friends General Account \$7,370. The current balance of the Conservation Fund is \$4,862.29.

This year two volumes of minutes have been restored: first, the Victorian Association of Journeymen Felt Hatters 1885–1889 (Ref: E87-21-1), costing \$2,310 and using money from the General Fund; and, second, using money allocated from the Conservation Fund, the minutes of the NSW Confectioners' Society 1889–1892 (Ref: N194-9) costing \$880.

The Conservator is currently working on a volume of minutes of the Professional Musicians' Association 1904–1907 (Ref: T7-1-4) costing \$2,970. Money for the restoration of this item will be taken from the Conservation Fund.

Colleen McEwen, Committee Member  
29 October 2022

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### Colleen McEwen Leaving Canberra

Colleen McEwen, a long-time member of the Friends and member of the Committee, is leaving Canberra after 41 years to take up residency in NSW and be near her family.

After qualifying as an archivist from the University of New South Wales in 1977 Colleen took up her first archival role at the State Archives of South Australia, where she worked for four years. This was at a time when government records and private records were both managed by the State Archives and provided Colleen with an opportunity to gain experience in both fields. Moving to Canberra in March 1982 she commenced work at the ANU's Archives of Business and Labour (ABL), staying until 1992. During her time at the ABL Colleen worked on many collections, but of note were the records of the ACTU and Burns Philp Company Limited, a once major Australian shipping line and merchant that operated in the South Pacific. She developed a strong interest in records relating to women in the workforce.

In 1992 she commenced working for the Defence Intelligence Organisation marking a move into the area of government records, which remained her focus for the rest of her career. In 1997 Colleen took up a position at the National Archives and for the next ten years held the positions of Assistant Director then Director in the areas of government recordkeeping and information management, with a particular emphasis on the management of electronic records. She led a team which developed the National Archives *Administrative Functions Disposal Authority*, covering the retention and disposal of government records across the Commonwealth. The significance of this publication was recognised by the Australian Society of Archivists,

receiving a Mander Jones publication award for making the greatest contribution to the archives profession in Australia written by a corporate body in 2000. Colleen's other contributions included leading a team which developed *Check Up*, an online tool for Commonwealth agencies to use to assess the management of their electronic records.



(l-r) Colleen McEwen, 3<sup>rd</sup> on the left, with Michael Saclier, Charles Dawson, Raj Jadeja, Ewan Maidment, Maureen Purtell and Carol McNally, inside the repository, Acton Underhill, 1991 (photo courtesy of Coombs Photography).

Throughout her career Colleen has always been a very strong supporter of archives and the profession being active in the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA), establishing the Business Archives Special Interest Group in 1985, serving on the ASA Council between 2001 and 2003, and holding positions on various Branches and Committees. Colleen is currently a member of the ASA's Professional Recognition Committee. She represented Australia for eight years on the International Council on Archives (ICA) Section for Professional Associations. During her time with the ICA she contributed to the international approval and subsequent promotion of the Universal Declaration on Archives which was adopted by UNESCO on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2011. For her efforts in supporting the profession Colleen was made a Fellow of the ASA in 2007 and a Fellow of the ICA in 2012.

Colleen has been a member of the Friends since its inception. After she retired from the National Archives she became Secretary of the Friends from 2008 until 2018, and edited the *FNAC Newsletter* during that time. Following a recommendation of an internal review working party chaired by John Dargavel in 2007, Colleen was instrumental in establishing the Friends' Conservation Fund: convening its committee and obtaining its Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status. To date the Fund has raised enough money (just over \$35,000) for the repair and conservation of 33 significant archival volumes, mainly 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian trade union minute books registered by the UNESCO Memory of the World project. Colleen also

became the Friends' Public Officer in 2020, steering the organisation through its registration as a charity with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) last year. Although Colleen is leaving Canberra, she will remain on the Committee participating in meetings via Zoom. She will also continue to manage the Conservation Fund and be the ACNC nominated responsible person for the Friends.

We wish Colleen all the best for her move.



Maggie Shapley, Colleen McEwen and Jill Caldwell at the FNBAC AGM, December 2021.

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### Review: Exhibition of Maritime Union's 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

The announcement in March this year that the Royal Australian Navy will acquire nuclear submarines has sparked renewed attention on Australia's maritime environment. Suddenly more people are talking about international shipping and its importance to the Australian economy. However, one group of working-class Australians has known for generations about the significance of Australia's maritime environment.

The most recent Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC) exhibition was *Struggle, Solidarity and Unity: 150 Years of Maritime Unions in Australia*. It used minute books, letters, newspaper clippings, union banners and gritty photography to trace the history of Australian waterfront and seafarer unions. The exhibition tells the stories of those who worked the wharves and crewed Australia's coastal ships from the nineteenth century to the present day. The stories of these workers are inseparable from Australia's economic and industrial history.

Traditionally wharves and ships were all male environments where what mattered was physical strength, endurance and closely bonded teams. The Exhibition's photos showed gaunt, wiry men stripped to the waist at work. It was not unusual for a man on the docks to carry a 300-pound load on his back and work long shifts. There was little job security and workers gathered each morning, hoping to be picked for the

day's assignments. Conditions were equally bad for the Australians who crewed the colliers, coastal traders and cattle ships that plied the coastal trade. Ship owners and masters expected seamen to work 80-hour weeks for as little as £1 and live in cramped, dirty accommodation.

Safety at sea was always a key concern and the exhibition recounted the fate of the freighter *Noongah*, which sank in heavy seas off Kempsey on 25 August 1969. Twenty-one crewmen drowned when huge waves smashed the ship's starboard deck. After the disaster, Australian maritime unions pressed for greater safety at sea. They also financially supported the wives and children of those who lost their lives for the next twenty-seven years.

Given these conditions, it is no surprise that 150 years ago waterfront workers and seamen established unions to improve their pay and conditions and argue for industrial safety. In time, a succession of wharf labourers' and seamen unions and marine, technical and administrative associations amalgamated and morphed into the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which today draws on their rich legacy to advocate for its members.



Loading bagged potatoes at No 35 Wharf, Darling Harbour, New South Wales, c. 1950s. Photo from NBAC (Z248-82).

Professor Diane Kirkby, who delivered this year's ANU Archives Annual Lecture, described Australia's ports as contested spaces and said maritime workers had traditionally carried a 'cargo of grievances'. The Australian waterfront has been the scene for some of the country's most divisive industrial conflicts. A pamphlet and photos in the exhibition bore witness to the 1890 Maritime Strike over the right of workers to join a union. The four-month strike boomeranged beyond the ports and eventually 50,000 dock hands, shearers, miners, gas stokers, and transport workers were involved. That dispute and the Shearers' Strike the following year led to the formation of the Australian Labor Party. The exhibition also showcased the bitter strikes of 1917 and 1919, and industrial turmoil in the

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1920s and 1930s when conservative Australian governments imposed harsh penalties on strikers and sought to deport union leaders. As well as fighting paternalistic and punitive workplace arrangements, maritime unionists have advocated for social reform and women's and Indigenous rights and have been unafraid to venture into areas of foreign policy. How they pursued these broader issues frequently brought them into conflict with ship owners, conservative governments and sometimes the Australian public. History, however, has mostly validated their approaches to such causes.

These struggles bred union leaders with unique abilities to strategize and direct industrial action, educate workers, and craft and articulate a vision for working-class people. Before the MUA, the two dominant unions — the Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen's Union — elected the same leaders time after time and they served for decades. Eliot Valens Elliott belonged to the Seamen's Union for thirty-seven years and was a committed Communist and a tough negotiator. Jim Healy, a big man in braces, was also a Communist and General Secretary of the Waterside Workers Federation for almost a quarter of a century. Successive governments and combative ship owners saw Healy as the boss who ruled the waterfront with an iron hand. Those he represented trusted and admired him. When Healy died, 640 cars formed a bumper-to-bumper funeral procession that snaked a mile through Sydney's central business district. The current MUA National Secretary continues this tradition and has led the Union since 1988. Like his predecessors, he has been active in international maritime labour organizations and helped establish conditions for seafarers worldwide.



Waterside Workers' Federation Women's Committee members feeding striking workers, undated. Photo from NBAC (Z248-81-12-02).

Traditionally, men have worked the ships, cranes and gantries, and crewed the national merchant line. Today, women make up about six per cent of the MUA's membership. The Union is committed to equal opportunities for women and workplaces free of harassment. This year, for the first time, a woman will fill the position of Assistant National Secretary. Women have been influential in other ways for years. Della Elliott was well known as an administrator and editor for the Seamen's Union and women's committees were established during the Second World War to support seamen. Women promoted the welfare of seafarers and their families. They campaigned for equal pay, industrial pensions, social justice, Indigenous rights, and international peace, and they regularly marched at events, demonstrations and May Day parades.

Those interested in Australian industrial history and unions can visit *Struggle, Solidarity and Unity: 150 Years of Maritime Unions in Australia* [online](#) at the NBAC website. In recent times, bulk loaders, containers and supertankers have replaced sailing vessels and steamships, and technology and automation have reduced the numbers on the waterfront. Yet the exhibition illustrates how maritime unions continue to evolve to champion the issues that concern their members.

*Bob Crawshaw, member of the FNBAC*

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Dear Friends,

This is a reminder that it is time to renew your FNBAC membership for 2023–24 and to consider making a donation to the FNBAC Conservation Fund.

The FNBAC's online membership renewal form is accessible at: [Membership Application/Renewal Form](#).

Alternatively, a FNBAC membership renewal form for 2023–24 is included with this newsletter for those who prefer to respond by post.

Best wishes and thank you for your continuing support,

Ewan Maidment,  
FNBAC Secretary

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